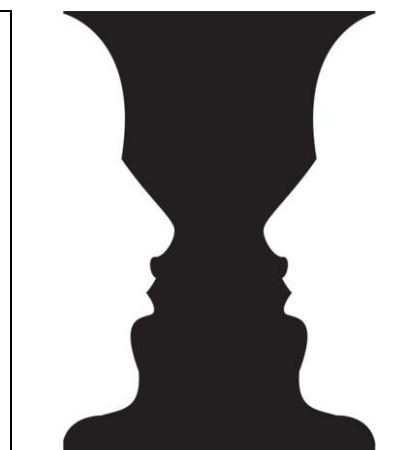

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Ordinary stories, dreams, miracles and social interactions

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Abstract

Storytelling and vernacular religion are complementary on multiple levels in the example of Lipsi (southeast Aegean, Greece), where the use of common symbols proves to be more durable than practices, even when the framework of official religion has changed. It is on this narrative web, which unfolds as oral tradition, as ritual practices or as landscape, that community members portray their routes over space and time.. This flow of stories told by all members of the community at every kind of gathering makes a collective identity trait through which the islanders communicate their worldviews, their perception of local history and shape their present lives as well. In my ethnography of Lipsi, storytelling emerges as an "art", in terms of aesthetic expression through performance. However, at the 'very moment' of this fieldwork experience, the natural and supernatural worlds are perceived as an indivisible whole whose parts are in constant communication, either through miracles, hierophanies and visions or through an abundance of wishes and invocations that people utter all the time in their everyday routine. In this paper I also report my own intersubjective amalgamation as a she-ethnographer within the fieldwork I conducted in the small Aegean island. The paper focuses on the storytelling practices of the community, presenting fieldwork data registered during 2005-2011, and 2014.

Keywords

Symbols, dreams, storytelling, vernacular religion, myth, saints, miracles, intersubjectivity, ethnography, fieldwork, worldviews, self-consciousness, Aegean islands, women, fertility

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“Stories provide shape to the flow of life”; the phrase, extracted from the call for papers on the “Anthropology of Storytelling” panel,² subtly suggests that we define ourselves and others by telling stories in our everyday life, whether these stories are stereotypical or loose narratives, with a more or less personal content. But what is the ethnographer’s response to them as he/she arrives as a stranger to a community which also makes the “case” to be sampled and studied? What happens as he/she delves increasingly deeper into the flow of the stories told by the members of the host community? How do these foreign stories interact with the shape of his/her own everyday reality elsewhere—ultimately, of his/her own life?

The first question makes reference to a long discussion with many contributions, among which that of M. H. Agar (1980) is widely considered as a classic one. On the occasion of this volume³ I would like to report my own fieldwork experience as a she-ethnographer, also dealing with the other two questions; I will thus refer to my own intersubjective amalgamation within the fieldwork I conducted in the small island of Lipsi, in the SE Aegean through regular visits from 2001 to 2011; I first visited the island in 2000 by coincidence for summer holidays.

Lipsi is the name of the largest among a group of small islands of a total area of 17km². This complex neighbours the bigger islands of Patmos in the west and Leros in the south. The island has always been linked to the island of Patmos and the Holy Monastery of Saint John the Divine; since the 11th century Lipsi formed part of the monastic community’s lands and was used either as hermitage or as crop fields, as the soil is relatively fertile. The island’s patron saint is “*Panaghia tou Charou*” (“Holy Virgin of Charon”). The local population, 790 permanent residents today (2011 census), has remained relatively stable since the 1950s. The long and close relationship with the monastic community of Patmos is obviously part of the history and the modern inhabitants’ collective memory. So with this opportunity I shall focus on narratives about encounters with the supernatural.

When I embarked on this project I had no idea where it might lead me, while given its long duration it was inevitable for my life to have changed considerably since then. “Stories provide shape to the flow of life”.⁴ In the case of long fieldwork projects such as mine on Lipsi, this is truer than ever. For more than a decade the pattern of my life

² The call for papers was launched at the occasion of the ASA Decennial Conference in Edinburgh in June 2014. I wish to thank again Jessica Symons and Rodolfo Maggio for the wonderful panel they organised in Edinburgh and their valuable comments for this publication.

³ This elaborated version was preceded by a paper entitled “*Sanctifying human experience in terms of social communication*” and given at the aforementioned conference, as is the case for all contributions in this volume. On the occasion of this publication, and after the interaction with my fellow panellists in “*Anthropology of storytelling*”, I attempt here to revisit my topic through a combination of three discourse styles: the academic style of a previous write-up (Papachristophorou 2013b), the personal, biographical style of a self-conscious field journal, and the discourse of my research participants themselves.

⁴ ASA2014 Anthropology of Storytelling - Call for papers

unfolded through field notes and journal entries, drafts for publication, papers, photographs, objects and the advent of a child that grew up in parallel and through the visits to the field. My life became closely interwoven and/or parallel with that of the people I met and got to know through their narratives. Also affected were my views on various things, particularly where my own everyday reality intersected that of the islanders. The truth is that every time I fit myself within the community I assume an intermediate identity quite different from that of my urban life out of Lipsi— even after completion of the project and the publication of the relevant book (Papachristophorou 2013a and 2013b).

As I re-read the early entries in my field journals I find that the main axes of my research were formed almost immediately, whether I spotted them from the outset or they were latent in my mind—or both. I wrote on August 9, 2001: “I decided to go ahead with the *terrain* that’s been on my mind since last year, when we first came on holiday. My desire to work on an island, and one that is close to some distant family roots. The impression left in me by the —miraculous— icon of *Panaghia tou Charou* that holds the Crucifix in place of the Holy Infant. The relation I assume it to have with emigration. Emigration ~ Death [*a couple of days later I added to this the symbolism of birth (which I went on to develop as fertility), mainly inspired by the representations of Virgin Mary*]. The idea that they themselves must have a somewhat strange perception of the Stranger, cut off as they are from mainland Greece, largely forgotten, with lots of emigrants and bent not just on surviving but thriving, too. With these in mind I came to collect narratives specifically on emigration, over the few days the Centre has given me. Later, we’ll see...”

I myself was at a turning point in my personal life and biological cycle, between a miscarriage and a successful pregnancy followed by motherhood. In terms of my research, *Panaghia tou Charou* eventually emerged as the dominant symbol (cf. Turner 1967: 31-32; 1969: 80 and 1978: 245-246) in the life of the community as I saw it over the ten years that followed. As for emigration, it was an idea I soon abandoned as the narratives I began to collect led me within the community and those who opted to stay on the island rather than leave; ten days later, on August 19, 2001 and shortly before my first attendance of the procession and the feast for *Panaghia tou Charou*, I wrote: “On emigration, although every family I have met has at least one expatriate, I have gathered very little. [A more popular subject] is the legends about the island’s inhabitation and the accounts of miracles.”

That summer I had left the island with negative feelings, as my interaction with most people was hindered by the reservation because of my original image as a tourist on the island —a *touristina*, as they mockingly described me at the time — and the sense that “the fieldwork I had just opened would occupy me for 2-3 years”. I had already begun to get close to two elderly participants (the one I never saw again, since he died before I was back again, even though he had placed me “in the garden of his children”, as he told me; the other proved to be invaluable, both for my research and my emotional world). These two people were the first to talk to me in a calm, straightforward manner and with no suspicion of any kind, in a torrent of communication which helped me to get at aspects not readily visible to the ‘naked eye’. It was they who gave me the first

examples of the richness of the local oral tradition, the local worldview as well as several practices I had yet to sense how relevant they were to my working hypothesis. I could claim that at the end of that first formal visit I had recorded, as a researcher at the Folklore Archive of the Academy of Athens, information about all aspects of popular culture in the form of oral narratives, from agricultural works, cheese-making and embroidery to customs, dances, fairs, songs and several narrations—albeit more like life stories than classifiable folk narratives. The truth is that the stories about practices of the material culture were easier to glean, as the participants obviously saw them as more harmless, non-specific and ultimately anonymous and objective information.

Nevertheless, by the end of that first sojourn the areas on which my research would focus had emerged and were of a clearly anthropological orientation; as I noted on August 29, having returned to Athens: “collective memory and identity formation / faith and miracles / rumours / oral history / historical traditions / the influence of the Church on orality”. Some key observations, later corroborated by a host of evidence, had already been made: for instance, that “the supernatural and the human coexist and encounter each other all the time”, or that “dreams and visions play a key role in the stories told”. At the same time, I was deciding to investigate “how do specific families (and their ancestors) named in their legends correlate to actual living persons today? How do the members of these families convey the legends that concern themselves as a collectivity?” Amid those observations there was something else I had hitherto seen as self-evident, without paying particular attention in research terms: the stories of everyday life, or narratives in general that are performed in a daily routine, while they unfold as chat usually with no specific form or reference to classifiable “genres”, are very constant in their worldview kernel.

It was two years later that I managed to return to the island and work on these ideas, and certain chance events had brought about major changes in the lives of both the island and myself: in the summer of 2002 Lipsi was inundated with reporters and became known throughout the country through the apprehension of the members of “November 17”, while I had been housebound with a difficult and precarious pregnancy which was successfully concluded. When I returned to the island in September 2003, we had all changed: some had got to enjoy publicity and the recording media, tape recorders and cameras, others felt morally and emotionally “betrayed” and were ever more reluctant to give interviews and answer questions, while I myself, could now perform a new social “role”, as a mother, and communicate more easily with the island’s adult females...

I ended up going back several times, in short visits between 10 days and five weeks each, gradually building contacts which remained “live” during the long intervals between trips, mainly by telephone. Inasmuch as my other professional and family obligations permitted it, I preferred to visit Lipsi outside the tourist season of the summer so as to get the picture of a “self-sufficient” local everyday life — the children had to do their homework, the visits and gatherings were more meaningful and in any case more spontaneous, bad weather was more frequent, ship schedules were cut down, and so on. Moreover, the community’s “focus” on itself increased the real time of my

every off-season stay, and allowed me to follow not only the “life cycle” of many individuals but also the “ritual year” with the changes in nature, the various human tasks and any customary practices I was able to record, observe and participate in. Our parallel lives reflectively unfolded in my mind and my papers as stories: back in Athens, I sought the narrative thread along which I could compose a whole out of the host of recorded narratives and the “scattered” talks that haunted my mind. On the island I entered another life, adopting a social role quite different to that of my city life, which in turn became a kind of narrative to be shared with the participants in the field; mostly, however, I adopted more or less the daily routine of the community and its own narrative/communicational context. Our communication and the stories which unfolded in an increasingly spontaneous manner became more liberated after an initial period of adjustment—mine as well as of the locals to my presence.

Over time I got to shed some of my own inhibitions with regard to recording information. I had always had my reservations about filming and the use of the camera, mainly because of its play-acting effects on individuals who interact without knowing one another well. However, I was surprised to find —by accident, in Agathonissi for the first time— that the participants were little affected by the camera and, unlike me (who would obviously lose the immediacy of communication, participation and observation), they almost forgot they were being filmed; by contrast, in most cases they seemed to be less at ease with the tape recorder or other, modern sound-recording equipment. This has probably made me “lose” a considerable amount of material which went unrecorded, but I gained in terms of my direct communication with people and my increasingly deeper involvement in the island’s life. Ultimately, it was participation and the experiential acquisition of information that led me deeper into the community I was studying.

Ten years passed like this; the older people passed away one after the other, the children grew, with an increasing number among them getting to study and feeling at home in cosmopolitanism of the modern media while others started their own families and established themselves as young professionals. My own child also became part of the fieldwork, getting to perceive Lipsi as his “place of origin” since he had no other such place of reference in his life, and growing up along with the children of the island, who became his friends...

In macroscopic terms, the narrated and “historical” time of the island became much longer than our own biological cycles and their overlaps, reaching back to the beginning of time through a construction of the local history which was meant to fill any gaps in historical continuity and memory and weave the community’s identity through time.

The oral tradition of the island associates its mythological origins with the goddess Calypso and the wanderings of Ulysses... The first modern inhabitants, however, arrived from Crete some 150 years ago: it was with the descendants of those people that I talked in the field, and with their children that my own child met, in the same places, and played with their buckets and spades on the island’s legendary beaches. The population was gradually mixed with people from the surrounding islands

and the neighbouring coast of Asia Minor. The community constitutes a limited social group that perceives the whole island as its settlement and as a unified linguistic (see narrative as well), moral and religious entity (cf. Mauss 1904-1905: 14-15); this entity is represented as an everlasting one, since the community has created its own time and its own “cosmology”, according to which the natural environment was created long before the advent of the modern inhabitants.

In this symbolic “universe”, humans perceive themselves as complementary to the sacred representations of their patron saints; moreover, the island’s (oral) tradition depicts it as a sacred place, in terms of both time and space construction. The semiotics of a “sacred place”, as symbolically projected onto the island in many ways (Papachristophorou 2013b: 76-79, 138esq; cf. Kyriakidou-Nestoros 1979), is emphasized also by the historical references in the recorded narratives which establish a sense of continuity for today’s inhabitants, linking them to the Holy Monastery of Patmos in the recent past and to Calypso and the wanderings of Ulysses in the distant, mythological past (cf. Hobsbawm 1983/1984: 1).

Holy Mary, Saint Nicolas, but also other saints are omnipresent in everyday life whereas hierophanies and miracles make part of collective and individual experience. The mythological dawn of a local time, the retreat of hermits and the clashes with the modern incomers who ended up settling down and leaving offspring, the encounters with pirates, the lands and the waters with their haunted treasures, the dreadful demons and the playful fairies, the miracles, the hierophanies, the country churches—all these accounts were giving life to bays, rocks, cavities and springs that remain silent to those who ignore their narrative background:

“See this building here. These are old walls. Before the flood. [...] This was their parish. Or so we were told. Fourteen thousand people, and they held Mass here. This little garden you see, underneath there is a mosaic. [...] Under the earth, which was carried in by the flood. [...] Here, the church was just the sanctuary. [...] Oh, I didn’t tell you about its treasures! When the sea got in... All the icons were gone, only Panaghia remained... the icons were all gone except for Panaghia, the sea reached up to here in ’55, when we had that ...deluge. We found octopi up here. The whole sea had reached here.[...] The other icons —Jesus, St John the Baptist— we found them over there, near the Police [Station], only Panaghia remained. All the icons, the fabrics, they all went: they got out through the door and were gone.”⁵

The account refers to the tsunami raised by the Amorgos’ earthquake in 1956 and to the country church consecrated to Holy Virgin at Kousselio, the landmark where the island’s oral tradition places the bath of goddess Calypso and the cave where Ulysses found refuge. In my view, the countryside of the island makes in general a narrative construction where the coexistence of human and supernatural beings, both sacred and profane, dominated for many decades and until recently.

⁵ Videod account-guided tour of the garden and the church of “Panaghia tou Kousseliou” by my elderly landlady, who looks after it. Lipsi, 2006.

In Lipsi, the history of the place is associated with a large number of narratives and hierophanies pertaining to the sovereignty of the Holy Virgin and going far back in mythological time to the goddess Calypso; I would argue for “long-term” symbolic mutations assimilating a number of feminine deity figures, from goddess Calypso, to Great Virgin (Panaghia Megali), Black Virgin (Panaghia Mavri) and ultimately to All-holy Virgin of Charon (Panaghia tou Charou). I perceived the All-holy Virgin of Charon (Panaghia tou Charou) as the dominant symbol in the small community’s life (Papachristophorou 2013b: 138-141).

At the ‘moment’ that I recorded the oral tradition of Lipsi, the stories recalled spontaneously mostly concerned lived experiences, even if one could classify them as legends or historical accounts. Stories spread within the community as “history”—and are history, at least from one ethnographic perspective; life stories and legends are subjects of everyday conversation among adults and mostly express (subjective) truths. The generations to come are likely to forget a large part of the collective repertoire relating to the first modern settlers on the island, but also about witnessing supernatural apparitions, mainly because youths reach higher education levels than their grandparents.⁶

The supernatural experience of a miracle is decisive for integration in the community; as a symbol of faith it implies, well beyond Christian dignity, participation in the common worldview – a worldview largely dictated by the teachings of the Orthodox Church. Experiencing a miracle is ultimately what makes the individual a full member of the community. Miracles are discussed by most, even by those who do not fully believe in them but still share some key principles of the common worldview. I would include in this social bracket the people of the harbour, particularly the men who live and work at this symbolic, social and physical border between land and open sea; between the inhabited—or just controlled—space of the community and the immensity of the ‘unknown’.

“My third child... I believe a lot in St Nicholas, I don’t know, everyone has a saint whom... with me, it’s St Nicholas... I am travelling on a fishing boat, and at some point I ring back home. My wife says ‘I’m pregnant’. We couldn’t have a third child because the first two births were difficult, with Caesarian section, and a third one was not allowed. Anyway. I went back on the boat and lied down, and as I was sleeping a Nicholas appeared before me, amidst a fog, and said ‘don’t fear, I’ll help you; it’s a boy.’ How can you not believe? The next evening, when I arrived at the port, I called her and said ‘it’s a boy, his name is Nicholas, and fear nothing.’ I named him Nicholas. It was on a mountain he appeared to me, in a fog; I couldn’t see his face but I knew it was Nicholas... ‘Don’t be afraid...’ And my son turned out to be a spirited child, too. The things he’s swallowed! Everything his mother had by way of detergent, Viakal and so on, he’s drunk it! We’ve even had to transfer him

⁶ All this concerns what one could call “loose” narratives, life stories and biographies in general, all those stories which express lived experience. I consider as part of this large narrative field of orality legends as well, which, like rumours, spread among the community by word of mouth.

[to hospital] by helicopter. He is fine, he's in the first grade of junior high school now."

This account is part of a free videoed interview with a middle-aged fisherman at the harbour of Lipsi while he was mending his nets, in December 2007. As a social space, the "harbour" is the antipode of "church", in the same way that coffee-shops frequented by men are the antipode of women's kitchens. At the harbour coffee-shop men almost stereotypically can—and are allowed to—drink, smoke and swear.

The women in church talk constantly about miracles, before mass and over the coffee that always follows the service. By sharing their supernatural experiences as well as their concerns about miracles and their definition ("tell me, isn't that a miracle?") they define themselves or, more accurately, they define their social role within the family and within the community.

"Come and see last year's [*Lazaraki*]⁷. This is last year's, my love. I eat it. [- *One year later...*] Yes. But take it in your hand. Look. There's nothing wrong with it. It's not as if it were mouldy or anything. If you leave bread, any kind of bread you can make, it will go mouldy in two or three days... It will smell bad, you won't be able to eat it. But these things, my love, like last year's loaf... they are blessed, because of the day. The Holy, Great and Blessed Good Thursday! And sometimes we cannot make dough on Good Thursday because we won't have the time, so it will have to be on Good Wednesday... [...] And now, in the Holy Week, you can eat it—it's suitable for fasting, of course—and have it with your coffee. [...]"⁸

Many of my acquaintances with women started exactly like this—over coffee and a chat (cf. Cowan 1990: 67-68)—where I tried to explain what I was doing on the island and they talked to me about their lives: mostly about their pregnancies and children, about miracles and visions associated with maternity and the birth of specific children. I thus noticed that the supernatural experience of a miracle or vision on the one hand has a bodily impact and on the other it authorizes deviations from social norms—for instance, deviating from the family heritage system to name a child in honour of the saint who intervened, or conceiving a child at a late age – late pregnancies (around the age of forty) are usually attributed to miracles. Women overcome the limits imposed by nature or society through miracles and their communication with the Sacred; intermediating thus allows them to impose their own ideology as dominant in many indirect and symbolic ways, mostly associated with the worship of Saint Mary.

Actually, the accounts of miracles always made me feel awkward, especially when they were told in a context of spontaneous communication and not for recording purposes. I could never offer a similar testimony (possibly because communicating through them was culturally unfamiliar to me), but I did manage to listen and empathise in profound respect, and also to interact with the participants, accepting (or, indeed,

⁷ A child-shaped bread product prepared by women in Lipsi and other parts of Greece to commemorate the resurrection of Lazarus, a few days before the Holy Week.

⁸ Videoed account in the kitchen of an elderly female interlocutor; Lipsi 2010.

attuning myself to) a frequency of non-verbal, deeply spiritual communication that allowed us to converse smoothly. Through this special kind of communication —where “what’s left unsaid is more”, as they commented themselves— I (re)learned to perceive life, time as well as space on the island the way it is steeped in the locals’ stories, conveying historical projections in the past and supernatural experience. Sacralized places are regularly reaffirmed as sacred throughout the ritual year with processions, where *Theotokos* officiates as Mother of God and symbolizes fertility; they follow specific lines, open or circular, centrifugal or centripetal. Inside these collective bodily movements the community once again “somatises”—as with the dreams, miracles and stories told— its symbols and its narrative tradition.

The small community of Lipsi shows indeed considerable familiarity with gatherings and walking, especially with forming processions, to the point where one could consider pilgrimage not as a rite of passage, as described by Turner and Turner (1978), but almost as part of everyday life.⁹ All processions that I participated and recorded in Lipsi follow specific *narrative maps*; those maps recall the settlement history of the first modern inhabitants and connect both places and history with customary practices throughout the year cycle. Consequently, narrative plots may also form an alternative way of perceiving space and time within a narrative culture.¹⁰ For the locals themselves, narratives function in any case as a chronological system of the island’s history. Interestingly, however, the dominant trends change over time and different “stories” prevail: in terms of origin, for instance, Calypso gave way to the first modern settler; in terms of religion, Panaghia Mavri was replaced by Panaghia tou Charou, Megali Panaghia by Ioannis Theologos, and so on.

Assuming my own course within the community in a narrative and/or ritual perspective I would say that it also merges with the great procession in celebration of Panaghia tou Charou. In August 2001, in the early days of my project and in my capacity as researcher for the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, I was running back and forth outside the procession taking shots and trying to capture as many views as I could for the Archive of the Academy of Athens. In 2006 I participated from the inside, and the same again in 2010 — along with my family this time and taking fewer and fewer photographs, more and more as an insider over the years. In the summer of 2014 I joined it as an official guest of the municipal authority: the community had decided to make me an honorary citizen of Lipsi in recognition of my love for the island and my academic contribution in

⁹ Victor Turner’s description of pilgrimage includes all three phases of a rite of passage as seen originally by Arnold van Gennep (1908/1981): separation, margin or limen and reaggregation. As an anti-structure however, the dominant phases in pilgrimage are those of liminality and *communitas*. In all processions and pilgrimages I attended in Lipsi, pilgrimage makes a conditional framework for a ritual performance along which the community updates and/or reaffirms its symbols – at any rate I cannot perceive it as a rite of passage (cf. Turner & Turner 1978: 249-251 and 253-254) at the only exception, maybe, of my own integration in the community.

¹⁰ Charles Stewart arrives at the same correlation in the case of Naxos, especially with regard to the apparitions of *exotika* and the cognitive mapping of space (1991: xv), and so does Tim Ingold in his *Lines* (2007), where he starts from a comprehensive theoretical approach to the import of “lines” for human civilizations to correlate the contexts of narratives with people’s routes in space and its mappings.

the revelation of its cultural history and identity.¹¹ In a sense, this “panegyric” pilgrimage in which practically the entire population is involved, reflects the community itself. My own position as ethnographer could be said to reflect the different stages of my integration into the community’s corpus. Starting outside the procession as a stranger, I was gradually “assimilated” within it over the years, together with my family. Now the community tends to eject the ethnographer; by bestowing this great honour and responsibility upon me it invites me to belong.

Oral narratives under the form of “ordinary stories” told in everyday occasions encounter in this broader case study the complex definition of myth as given by Durand: “by myth we understand a dynamic system of symbols, archetypes and schemata which, under the impetus of a schema, tends to be composed into a story”, where “schema” denotes the overall depictive dynamic of the imaginary, mainly in the philosophical sense of the term (Durand 1992: 64). Myth for Durand is not “the typical underside of a ritual act”, but a “rationalization outline”, whereby “symbols are resolved into words, and archetypes into ideas” in the flow of speech. Conversely, therefore, we could see as a myth any narrative which is perceived as true inside a particular *worldview*, in which the *world* is a combination of nature and the supernatural and *view* is the uncontested system of values and beliefs through which the community perceives itself and the world. This very procedure of mythicization conversing with rational models through collective identifications is likely to enable a *worldview* to become a dominant ideology far beyond its religious scope (cf. Dimitriou-Kotsoni 1994).

At the end of this journey, where this supernatural view of the world in the community’s narratives and experiences dominated in so many terms, as I was leaving the island this summer and saying goodbye to my eldest interlocutors, I felt the need to add a symbolic farewell to the island’s Great Lady (Megali Panaghia) as a member of the community, as a leading figure of its collective representations but also, by now, as part of my own memory and imaginary...

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¹¹ As the “honoured lady” I ought to join the officials at the head of the procession, but I chose to stay back in the main body.

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