



The church of the Virgin Chrysafitissa and the 'Inn of Gravia', where Ritsos was born

RITSOS ON MONEMVASIA

John Kittmer finds tantalizing traces of the great poet on Monemvasia and explores how the landscapes shaped his work

The terrain of Greece is soaked in narrative; tales of every sort cling to landscapes and seascapes alike. Mythology, ancient histories, biblical stories, the epics of the Byzantine borderlands, medieval chronicles, folk tales, the romances of the Cretan Renaissance, adventures of English milords, the poems, novels and plays of the modern state. All have left their deposits – the accumulated archaeology of millennia of story-telling. Reading them on location is every traveller's pleasure.

Michael Carroll's recent book, *Greece: A Literary Guide for Travellers* (reviewed in issue 7 of *ARGO*), identifies many rich narrative deposits, concentrating on British interactions with Greece. It's a good read and gives helpful literary directions for different parts of the country. But no such guide is exhaustive, and

Carroll's passes over an unmissable jewel of the Peloponnese. This article gives the literary-minded traveller the relevant bearings.

Monemvasia lies off the southeast coast of Laconia, some 190 miles or so to the southwest of Athens by modern roads, or 110 miles by sea. It is a beautiful place: a mighty rock, a peninsular fortress tethered to the mainland by a thin spit of earth, a ship at anchor in the dazzling blue sea. Rising to 900 feet at its highest point, its principal axis lies east-west, and on that axis it's about a mile long. The Byzantines cut a channel through the spit and built a bridge over it to control entrance: the so-called μονή έμβαση ('sole entrance'), which gives the place its name. The Venetians called it Malvasia; we named it Malmsey and prized its wines.

Anciently, there was a settlement on the top of the rock and one on its lower, southern flank. The upper city is now deserted, apart from the glorious 12th-century church of Agia Sophia, the Holy Wisdom, pinioned dramatically to the sheer northern cliff. The settlement has mighty fortification walls. The main entrance to the lower city is in the western wall; a fortified gate controls the passage between lower and upper city.

Here, on 1 May 1909 (Julian calendar), Yannis Ritsos was born. He would become the most famous poet of the Greek Left, but he had privileged origins. Apparently with Cretan roots, the Ritsos family had been long established in Monemvasia and, by the end of the 19th century, was one of the area's two biggest landowning families. Ritsos' paternal grandfather, Dimitrios,

owned hundreds and hundreds of acres. After his murder in 1910, his seven sons, including Ritsos' father Eleftherios, each acquired substantial landholdings.

Monemvasia has a long and complex history. The place was first settled in the sixth century AD: a time of turmoil in the Peloponnese. By the tenth century, it was an important naval and commercial centre, exporting silk and Malmsey wines. After the Fourth Crusade, it maintained its independence for over 40 years, but was eventually taken by Villehardouin after a three-year siege. It was returned to the Byzantines a few years later. In the early modern period, Venetian and Ottoman rule alternated. Perhaps surprisingly, given its fortress-like qualities, Monemvasia fell early to the Greeks in the War of Independence. The Turks gave it up in August 1821 after a siege of just four months (Thomas Gordon's history accuses the defenders of cannibalism). Since 1828, Monemvasia has been part of the Greek state.

The informed literary traveller can find many traces of Ritsos in the city. As a boy, he lived in two houses successively: initially, in the eastern segment of the city, by the church of the Virgin Chrysofitissa, and then by the western wall, just above its main entrance gate. But Ritsos' father also inherited land in the hinterland of Monemvasia. The family spent its summers at the houses at Hatzalaga and Velies: idyllic places. Hatzalaga – an hour or so away from Monemvasia – had doves, ducks, chickens, pigs and rabbits, a substantial pine forest, a landscape of prickly pears, cypress trees, evergreen shrubs and Greek strawberry trees. At Velies, the land was given over to orchards – full of fruit, walnuts and almonds – and to vineyards. The land here was fertile and well watered; frogs used to sing in the springs. Closer to Monemvasia itself, at 'Yefira', is the settlement's beach, where Ritsos and his family would bathe.

The family were monarchists and staunchly Orthodox; when not on the land, they pursued careers in the

'His own family tragedy becomes that of the House of Atreus'

navy – producing distinguished officers in the War of Independence and again in the Balkan Wars. Ritsos' father was not an intellectual, but he was wealthy and connected. A gambler at cards, something of a live wire, he was also a churchman, indeed, a churchwarden.

Ritsos' mother, Eleftheria, was a very different type. She came from the port of Gytheio, 50 miles or so to the west of Monemvasia, at the edge of the Mani. Her parents were merchants, owners of one of Gytheio's general stores. Eleftheria had completed her secondary education in the town. She knew French, read poetry and other literature, played the piano and had intellectual, 'Leftist' interests of which her husband disapproved. She encouraged Ritsos' artistic interests in music (he played the piano and the mandolin), in art (he painted obsessively) and in literature (she was clear from his earliest years that he would be successor to the great poet Palamas).

Yannis Ritsos was the fourth and last of Eleftherios and Eleftheria's children. He was born in a large stone building, the 'Inn of Gravia', which belonged to the church of the Virgin Chrysofitissa, and is also known as the 'cells'. Accommodation on the ground floor was divided into small rooms that were let to pilgrims come to venerate the icon. Above, there was a single large home which, in 1909, Ritsos' father was renting from the church for his young family.

The whitewashed church is a famous shrine of pilgrimage. The icon of the Virgin Chrysofitissa still works its wonders. Ritsos' father was a churchwarden here for life. The building, with Turkish features, appears to have been constructed during the first period of Ottoman rule between 1540 and 1690.

The family home was located between the Virgin Chrysofitissa on the lower ground and Saint Nicholas on higher ground. The Church of St Nicholas would also be important to Ritsos. It's an early 18th-century building and reveals Venetian influence, not least on its western façade, which has an inscription dated by the founder to 1703, the second period of Venetian rule. Here, in 1913, at the age of four, Ritsos began his primary education. Ritsos attended alongside his sister, Loula, who, although a year older than him, was held back a year, so that they could do their schooling together. After five years of primary schooling here, Ritsos and Loula passed on to their junior education, which they completed in three years.

In 1913, at the time that Ritsos and his sister started primary schooling, Ritsos' father moved the family from the Inn of Gravia to a house in the west of the city. He had bought it to be the family home in Monemvasia, and that was the role it would play throughout Ritsos' formative years.

The house has a lovely location. Standing immediately behind the western gate on a higher level, close to the wall, with the rock of the upper city rearing behind, it has a small garden and inside has five substantial rooms on each of the two floors. The views to the south from the windows, balcony and terrace are superb.

The happiness of Ritsos' privileged childhood was short-lived. His mother and elder brother Mimis, a naval cadet, would die of tuberculosis within a few weeks of each other, in 1921, when Ritsos was just 12. The consequences were disastrous for the family. His father had to sell land to pay for Mimis' convalescence; land reform and gambling put paid to the rest. Loula and Ritsos were sent away to grammar school in Gytheio, where Ritsos' mother had been schooled. For four years, they lived largely with their mother's siblings. Ritsos never again lived permanently in the family home. In 1925, after his schooling ended, he chose to stay at Velies, by then the



The Ritsos family home, by the western gate

last of the land properties. In 1926, returning from Athens, where he had shown tubercular symptoms, he chose to stay in a hotel. After that, he wouldn't return to Monemvasia for over 25 years, and the house, which became his on the death of his father, was never reoccupied.

Ritsos lived his adult life in Athens and on Samos, his wife's home. But his last journey was a return home. He died in Athens on 11 November 1990, aged 81, and was buried three days later in Monemvasia. His grave lies in the cemetery to the west of the city gate. It's a peaceful place. The tomb has an elegant profile of the poet set in bronze on a marble stele; on it, in his own handwriting, is a personal epitaph: 'Last will and testament'. He wrote it in 1969 under house arrest in the dictatorship.

*He said: I believe in poetry, in love, in death,
which is precisely why I believe in immortality. I write a verse,
I write the world; I exist; the world exists.
A river flows from the tip of my little finger.
The sky is seven times blue. This purity
is once again the prime truth, my last will.* (tr. N.C.Germanacos)

These, then, are the places in Monemvasia where you feel closest to Ritsos. But in terms of his poetry, what does this matter? How important is Monemvasia to Ritsos' writing? Does it mean to him something like the Lakes do to Wordsworth? Or Northamptonshire to John Clare? Should we be thinking about Wessex and Hardy? Papadiamantis and Skiathos? Or is there something more grittily ideological in play, like Leeds to Tony Harrison? Just how does Monemvasia figure in Ritsos' poetry?

In 1984, Ritsos said, 'Monemvasia was the protagonist in all my verses'. This was an exaggeration, but an important one. It seems to me that Monemvasia features in his poetry in three different 'modes', each of them reflecting successive states he reached in assimilating the tragic events of his childhood. I call these modes lyrical, mythological and historical.

From 1937, Ritsos turned to free verse, writing in a highly exalted, *lyrical* and often highly metaphysical fashion. Poems such as 'Spring symphony', 'March of the ocean' and 'A firefly lights up the night' are set in idealized landscapes that appear to reflect Monemvasia and the properties at Hatzalaga and Velies.

In interviews about his childhood, Ritsos tells us often how he would sit with his back to the rock of Monemvasia, mesmerized by the sea and the sky: both seemingly infinite, both glorious in blue. Although the location is not specified, the following passage from 'The march of the ocean' must be the view from the family home.

*The sea, the sea
In our mind in our soul in our veins
the sea.*

*We saw the boats bringing mythical lands
here to the golden shore
where the evening strollers linger.
We dressed our childhood loves
in damp seaweed.
We offered to the gods of the seashore
glossy shells and pebbles.*

*Morning colours dissolved in the water
fires of dusk on the shoulders of gulls
masts that show the infinite
open thresholds for the footstep of night
and above the sleep of the rock
on high all bright unquenched
the song of the sea
entering through the small windows
tracing gardens twinkling light and dreams
on damp windows and sleepy heads.*
(tr. John Kittmer)

From the mid 1950s, Ritsos started writing the monologues which are probably his most distinctive contribution to Greek poetry of the 20th century. Most of these centre on retellings of Ritsos' family tragedy, *mythologized* and absorbed into the cycle of ancient Greek tragedy: the tragedy of the House of Atreus. To this vision the family home at Monemvasia is pivotal. It was in these years that Ritsos finally returned to Monemvasia after nearly 25 years away. 'When I returned for the first time', he said, 'I felt all my dead returning behind me. I felt somewhat embittered and felt my home to be an inhospitable place. But, bit by bit, I

no longer saw them as dead, and I was reconciled to them. Not reconciled to death, but reconciled to the dead and I felt the need to give them a place in my poetry.’ The monologues of the 1950s to 1970s are that place. In them, Ritsos portrays Greek time as diachronic and cyclical, with patterns that recur, even as they are subject to displacements of place. His own family tragedy becomes that of the House of Atreus – as if the north of the Peloponnese has shifted to this southeastern outpost.

The ‘Dead house’ is a good example. Here the house’s inhabitants appear like those of Ritsos’ family. Two sisters remain, one of whom has ‘gone mad’. Father and mother are dead; there is a missing brother. It’s like Electra and Chrysothemis at Argos. A younger brother appears, who paints – just like Ritsos in his childhood:

*a vein of music vibrating in the air
and you hear it over and over, and
you don’t know
just where it’s coming from – a little
above the trees?
or father’s locked-up armoury with the
trophies of all those futile wars,
or the empty sandals of the elder
brother, the sailor – he’s been
away at sea for years,
and who knows if he’ll ever come
back –
or the young brother’s sketchbooks
(he’s stopped writing us from the
sanatorium)
or poor Mother’s clothes closet
(tr. Peter Green, Beverly Beardsley)*

Across these monologues, Ritsos examines his own identity and the history of his family through the prism of Greek myth. Monemvasia, as Argos/Mycenae, is the disguised but recognizable protagonist.

In the 1970s, Ritsos finally wrote openly about Monemvasia. ‘I gave my verses a name: the name Monovasia.’ In all the earlier poems where the influence of Monemvasia is felt, the place is simply intuited. But in the collections *Monovasia* and *Women of Monemvasia*, Ritsos gives

his ancestral home a quasi-historical treatment. These poems are characterized by an archaeological view of Greek time and place. Monemvasia is a physically layered place: above, the sky, then the high rock, the houses and churches tumbling on top of each other, the sea walls, finally the sea. But that layering has its temporal equivalent: century is piled on century, and time appears to be a continuum in which all parts of the chain are eternally present.

*Foundations under foundations. The
churches under the houses.
Belfries above the houses. At what
depth of rock
is the fig tree upheld by its root? By
what branch of the wind
is the gold-winged Archangel
upheld? We will ascend above*

*supported on the shoulders of the
dead, with the earth on our chests
in a procession of ruins, and the
prickly pears arranged
along the length of time, mute,
unresponsive,
with their broad hands blunting the
clang of the buried church bell.
(tr. Kimon Friar, Kostas Myrsiades)*

It is an unmistakably mature vision, which can be pursued in the streets of the city and in the mind. Literary travellers to the Peloponnese should not miss out on either Monemvasia or Ritsos. *Mérite le voyage.*

This article is based on a lecture delivered in London for the British School at Athens on 7 June 2018.



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Ritsos’ grave in the cemetery at Monemvasia