CHAPTER 6

Classical Antiquity and Modern Greek National Identity: Reliving the Ancient Maritime Heritage at the Sea of Salamis

Eleni Stefanou

1 Introduction

Today we celebrate almost 2500 years from the Naval Battle of Salamis with such a great significance for Greece and humanity because it established the prerequisites for the survival of civilisation and Hellenism. The Naval Battle of Salamis is not important just as a significant naval event but also because it demonstrated that the entire Greek future is utterly connected to the sea. Its messages are still dominant and show that the future of Greeks is connected to free societies, democracy, and freedom.

Every year on the last weekend of September the island of Salamina commemorates the Naval Battle of Salamis, an historical event of great importance for the classical Greek antiquity that took place in 480 BC, when the fleet of the Athenian Coalition successfully confronted the Persian fleet. As seen in school textbooks, maritime museums, and official historiographical texts, the Naval Battle of Salamis is largely depicted as the most important naval event of the Greek national maritime past. In the website of the Piraeus Prefecture, the Naval Battle of Salamis is referred to as a «luminous example of superb thought, maritime ability, and mainly Greek bravery. The glorious result in favor of the Greeks allowed the Greek nation to acquire consciousness of its superiority, and also it has taught and it still teaches people that faith in the ideals of freedom and democracy should be above all».

2 Speech by the Mayor of Ambelakia Mr. Agapiou, September 2005 (author's translation).
3 Η Ναυμαχία της Σαλαμίνας αποτελεί φωτεινό παράδειγμα της μεγαλοφυούς σκέψης, της ναυτικής δεινότητας, κυρίως όμως της γενναιότητας και ομοψυχίας των Ελλήνων. Η λαμπέρη της έκβαση υπέρ των Ελλήνων αφενός επέτρεψε στο ελληνικό έθνος να αποκτήσει συνείδηση του μεγαλειώδους
Salamineia, as the commemorative ceremony of the naval event is named, takes place on the top of the so-called "Magoula" hill, which is a designated archaeological site because of the findings relating to the tombs of those who fought at sea and to the remains of the submerged ancient harbor from which the triremes set sail. In reality, the Magoula hill is actually a landfill, surrounded by rusty sunken shipwrecks, such an ironic contradiction to the glorified rhetoric proclaimed by the performative event.

The opening ceremony of Salamineia is symbolically held outside of the island, at the Monument of the Unknown Soldier in front of the Greek Parliament in Athens. It includes a short commemorative event and wreath laying, attended by Greek politicians, the Military Forces, the Hellenic Navy, delegates of many different states from Europe and beyond, whose national flags were carried by traditionally dressed local women in front of replicas of ancient weaponry and shields, the Navy's Musical Band, local folk dance groups and, local theatrical groups.

Back on the island, the celebrations reach their peak with the Christian orthodox memorial service «for those who heroically fought for our faith σθένους του, αφετέρου δίδαξε και διδάσκει στους λαούς ότι «νυν υπέρ πάντων» είναι η πίστη στα ιδανικά, της ελευθερίας και της δημοκρατίας (www.nomariapeiraia.gr/Templates/deltia_tipou/2005/09/27b.htm; last accessed 04/03/2008).

Although it is an archaeological site which belongs to the state according to the Greek Law 3028 for the Protection of Antiquities, a peculiar status of ownership exists. Salamina is an island full of dockyards, which also surround the Magoula hill, as property of a Greek shipping company Arkadia A. E. On 14/11/1964 the place was declared archaeological site but in 1971 the Ministry of Culture under the Colonels Dictatorship sold the area to Arkadia A. E. which needed it to construct shipyards, provided that they would not cause any damage to the tombs and the surroundings of the hill. In 1975 the company applied for a permit to carry out work, which was turned down. Still, part of the hill's eastern area was arbitrarily bulldozed destroying several tombs during the construction of an outdoor storage area for charcoal and iron-plates. Hence, after 1975 the bones from the tombs were collected by archaeologists of the Greek archaeological service. In 1985 the archaeological service started a procedure for the expropriation of the area which has remained "frozen" due to financial disagreements. In 1989 it was suggested to expropriate just 5,531 square meters, whereas in 1991 the archaeological service further suggested the compulsory expropriation of the entire area (around 20,000 square meters more) belonging to the shipping company. However, when the compulsory expropriation was actually attempted under the leadership of Th. Mikroutsikos, the Greek Minister of Culture (16/05/1994–21/01/1996), the owners of Arkadia A. E. demanded compensation of one billion drachmas (£2.026.041.454). This amount of money was never given to them and since then the procedure for the archaeological exploitation of the site has been "frozen" (newspapers Kyriakatiki Avriani 25/11/2005, Rizospastis 29/01/1998, Eleftherotypia 04/02/1993, Pontiki 27/05/1993).