

When Harvati became Mycenae.
Replacing 'barbarous' toponyms in Greece in the early
twentieth century
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Introduction - The first Greek National Assembly was convened in December 1821, during the revolution against Ottoman rule, in Piada, a small village in the Peloponnese. A few months later, the newly formed Administration decided to commemorate the event by renaming the place; Piada became New Epidaurus, acquiring a name from classical antiquity. The Piada incident initiated a long-lasting practice of changing names and adapting geography to the political and ideological necessities of the state. In total, from 1831 to 2011, almost 5,000 settlements were renamed in Greece, some of them more than once.

Toponyms and Greek nationalism in the nineteenth century - During King Otho's long reign (1832-1862), statecraft and nation building were both founded on the alleged revival of ancient Hellenism. This perception was seriously challenged, when Jacob Philipp Fallmerayer declared the complete eradication of the Greek nation and its replacement by a mixture of mainly Slavic tribes during the Middle Ages. Challenging the continuity of the Greek race repudiated the Greeks' pretensions to being considered as the living representatives of the ancient Hellenic

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civilization. Since toponyms were considered as records of historical developments in the Greek soil, the state directed its attention to Strabo's geography, replacing, where necessary, names in use with classical or archaic-looking ones. 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 in the administrative map. In the period 1863-1908, only 38 cities changed name, in most cases abandoning a foreign for an ancient Hellenic one.

The 'Commission of the Toponyms of Greece', 1909-1945 - In 1909, the Commission of the Toponyms of Greece was created by Royal Decree. In the preamble, the Minister of Interior Nikolaos Levidis stated straight out the reasons that made the formation of such a committee imperative. 'Foreign elements' had infiltrated in the map displacing the old Greek names. 'Barbarous' and 'cacophonous' names, which were not associated with Greek history, had a bad 'educational effect' on the inhabitants and gave a 'false impression' of the national composition of Greece to foreigners. Levidis also stressed the need to organize the whole effort according to 'strict scientific criteria'. Nikolaos Politis, the father of folklore studies in Greece, was named president of the Commission, which also comprised university professors (historians, archaeologists, and philologists), cartographers, and high-ranking civil servants. 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') came to the surface. The Commission struggled to be equal to the task. As a result, in the years 1912-1920, only 200 changes of name were approved by the Commission; among them that of Harvati.

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. Its population ranged between 121 inhabitants in 1846 and 252 inhabitants in 1907. However, this small community of farmers and shepherds was the only case of name-changing that the Commission approved of in 1916 in that large area. The place presented three features, which summarize the whole problem of dealing with toponyms in Greece. At first, its original name, Harvati, was a hangover from the early Middle Ages, when Slavic tribes settled in the area. 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, noticed in 1889 that 'all 162 of its inhabitants are Albanians and speak Albanian'. The same author stressed that Harvati 'has nothing worth-mentioning except that it is situated 1,500 meters away from the acropolis of ancient Mycenae'. All the components 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 they were coming across the Community (after 1912) of Harvati in the environs of prehistoric Mycenae. In September 1916 the Commission consented to the proposal of the local council of Harvati and renamed the village to Mycenae. Politis's report is revealing: 'The name Harvati reminds of the settlement in the village of Croats... this ignominious and insignificant event obliterated the venerable name of Mycenae, where the modern village is built... the council of Harvati has the legitimate right to demand its ancient name back'.

Voices of protest and the ‘mottled blood’ - Some historians, geographers, and philologists (Lamprou, Miliarakis, Dimaras) pointed out that the revival of ancient toponyms erased from the map any remnants of the medieval and modern history of the country. Fotos Politis, the son of Nikolaos Politis, launched a harsh criticism against the Commission presided by his father correctly underlining its motives; existing toponyms were alive, integral part of ‘the people’s soul’, Minister Levidis was a ‘maniac... an ancestor-worshiper’, while it was hopeless for a nation to be ashamed of and to try to hide its mixed origin, its ‘mottled blood’. However, the demand for preserving popular culture remained a marginal part of the national discourse in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Conclusions - After the Greek revolution, the necessity of a new toponymic map that would reflect the unity of Hellenism in time and space led to the organized renaming of settlements in Greece. Harvati became Mycenae in 1916, but villages were changing names in Argolida as late as 1953. Despite the reactions and mistakes, the general idea that by changing a name you can manipulate collective memory proved to be effective. Today, in 2021, in a Greek travel site it is stated that tourists can visit ‘Mycenae... a small village of about 450 inhabitants, located in the NE of the Argolida plain. Until 1928 [sic] the village was called Harvati. Since then it took its ancient name again. The current inhabitants of the village cultivate the land of their ancestors’.