

## THE ISLE OF THE COLOSSUS

*When the small Mediterranean island of Rhodes jumped into the news last autumn, this was one of the minor consequences of Badoglio's treason. Among the many rapid actions by which the German High Command countered this treason was the appearance of German troops on Rhodes. Today for the first time in history the German flag is fluttering over the ancient cities of the island.*

*The following pages do not deal with politics or war<sup>re</sup>. They paint a vivid picture of life and customs on the island, one of the most colorful spots in the Mediterranean from the ethnographical and cultural point of view.—K.M.*

**A**T the feast offered by the history of culture, the islands of the Mediterranean represent special delicacies. Although they present neither the nourishing, solid food nor particularly original dishes coming from the great kitchen of culture, these scattered fragments of land dotting the ocean offer the observer curious mixtures and transformations of the elements of the great cultures which arose around the Mediterranean. They are like the remaining pillars of sunken bridges over which hosts of adventurers once moved, leaving traces still alive today.

Rhodes is the easternmost of the Sporades, forming the last link in the chain from Crete to the Anatolian mainland as well as in that off the Anatolian coast coming from Lesbos. To this day Rhodes unites on its soil the Orient and the Occident, antique and medieval ruins, Byzantine and Spanish echoes of the past, relics of faith from church, mosque, and synagogue. If one is to trust available figures, 45,000 people, of whom parts are constantly emigrating to Greek territory and to America to make room for new generations, now inhabit what was once the favorite place of the sun god.

According to Greek legend handed down by Pindar's mighty verses, Rhodes had been given to Helios, the sun god, who arrived in the evening after having done his day's work when all the rest of the world had already been distributed among the gods. Helios then fastened the poor little island, which up to then

had been floating around in the sea, and blessed it with his gifts of light and warmth. To this day, the equable, mild climate of the island is praised, and to this day the orange groves of the town, the olive orchards of the countryside, and the wealth of flowers and fruit, testify to the bounty of the sun god.

Greek history begins for Rhodes with the Dorians, who reached the island in their last expansion and inhabited the three towns of Lindos, Jalyosos, and Kamiros. The latter two are now hidden under little villages; the town of Lindos, however, still possesses something of the proud atmosphere of the ancient *polis*. The castle with the ruins of the famous temple of Athene Lindia looks down from steep rocks onto the picturesque bay. The town of Rhodes was not built till 407 B.C. according to a uniform plan. By reason of its favorable situation on the route to Asia and Egypt, it experienced its greatest prosperity in Hellenistic times. For five decades the thirty-four-meter-high bronze statue of Helios, the "Colossus of Rhodes," considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, probably stood at the very spot in the harbor where, at the end of a long mole, a mighty tower from medieval days stood until the nineteenth century, when it, too, collapsed. Nothing remains of the Colossus, and only a few ruins of all the other glorious buildings of antiquity.

Even in Roman times and all the more during the Byzantine Empire, Rhodes

declined to provincial insignificance and became an easy prey to pirates coming from all parts of the Mediterranean. Finally, in 1309, the Knights of St. John, who had been driven from the Holy Land, conquered it and imprinted on it the seal of their imperious spirit. For two hundred years they ruled over Rhodes until, in 1523, after heroic resistance, they had to yield to the supremacy of Suleiman. The appearance of the town as a whole, the crenelated walls, the towers of the harbor, the magnificent façades combining Moorish and late Gothic motifs, indeed, an entire street of hospices rising up to the castle and called



the "Street of the Knights"—all this is the work of architects, mostly Italian, who created a glorious bulwark at the threshold of the East for these lingering representatives of the Middle Ages.

The Turks, who took over this heritage and whose initial might soon gave way to slackness and indolence, enlivened this rather severe milieu of the Knights with the usual Oriental touches of color. Slender minarets and bathhouse cupolas appeared among the grim walls; bare

gray house walls were crowded together into narrow streets spanned by arches. The occupation of the island by the Italians in 1911 drew it closer to the Occident again. It was here, then, that the noisy bustle of market square and harbor, the enjoyment of dreamy idleness, and the crafts handed down from ancient days, were and still are to be found. People without time and without history swarm around the heroic traces of a past that has stood still.

**L**ET us now step among these people and try to fathom what is still alive in them of the island of Rhodes. We listen to the tales of these Greek, Turkish, and Jewish people. For here, as all over the world, the soul and nature of the people are most purely and directly revealed in the abundance of their stories. The great products of the mind and the great deeds of history live on in the people. Indeed, even in ancient days the inhabitants of Rhodes were known for their storytelling, especially for their tall stories, as is shown by the famous utterance: "*Hic Rhodos hic salta!*" A man from Rhodes visiting Thebes had been telling such tall stories about the dancing prowess of his own countrymen that his listeners finally became impatient and said: "Let this place be Rhodes and show us!"

Among the modern Greeks on Rhodes the sponge divers are great storytellers. While the sailing barks drift along at night, the long hours of waking are filled with tales of travel and adventure, of skillful divers and bold pirates. Or the strong, happy stevedores assemble in the evening with their wives and children to outdo each other with thrilling or witty stories. The foreigner is treated as a guest and served bergamots in syrup and a glass of Mastika, while the stream of stories flows on deep into the night.

With the Turks, the steam bath is the traditional place for leisurely debating and merry storytelling. The fat men lie perspiring, stretched out in rows one over the other along the walls, a fountain

splashes in the center, and smoke and conversation fill the room. The tutelary goddess of storytelling, whether you like to call her leisure or idleness, rules supreme in the coffee shops, and her cult is supported by the worship of the coffee cups and water pipes and accompanied by endless games of tricktrack. Here you find the professional storytellers, so popular with the Turks, who fill the nights of Ramasan with their never-ending recitals. "I know a story that lasts four nights," one of these storytellers says.

The manner of telling a story and the gestures accompanying it differ significantly among the three races. The Greek tells it in a monotonous voice, while the Turk employs all the tricks of an actor. In the case of the Jew, the story is told almost reluctantly, and he drily gives you its contents. The professional storyteller is to be found only among the Turks. He is closely related to the shadow player; the lively dialogue, the coarse puns, have their origin in the most Turkish of popular arts. The storyteller is adept at imitating all kinds of voices: scolding women, screaming Jews, roaring soldiers, pining lovers, majestically rumbling pashas and *walis*, from the most exaggerated falsetto to the deepest bass, enliven the story. Nor does the Turkish narrator lack dramatic gestures: he beats his chest and his temples, strokes and tears at his beard, rolls his eyes, and rocks his whole body.

**W**HAT are the stories about? Ancient Greece has sunk into oblivion. There is hardly a trace of it to be found in the tales of these people. Mount Olympus and its gods, the heroes of legend and of history—all are forgotten. That Greek influence which still lives with surprising strength in these stories is medieval, purely Byzantine. Here again the modern Greeks show themselves

to be the descendants of that last creative flare-up of Greek mentality expressed by Orthodox Christianity. What distinguishes them is their religious cleavage, which makes them skeptical as well as fanatical, uniting immorality with an intolerant cult of saints.

Hence ridiculing the *papas*, the Orthodox priest, and his *despot* (bishop) provides an inexhaustible motif for Greek stories. In the eyes of the people the priest has lost all spiritual dignity, being only the representative of ecclesiastical magic founded in custom and superstition. To outwit him and at the same time to attribute evil or even criminal motives to him provides the greatest satisfaction. On the other hand, however, there is a genuine faith in superior powers manifested in the legends of the saints.

Even in the popular tales told about them on Rhodes, the Turks reveal the true character of a master people, of a manly nation not very rich in intellect but strong and free in spirit. They lack bitterness and scorn, their laughter is open and hearty. Folly is a natural pleasure to them and always capable of expressing true wisdom of life. Although his Central Asiatic origin has not endowed the Turk with the oriental imagination of the Indian, Persian, or Arab, many fantastic motifs have entered his emotional world as the result of centuries of living together with those other peoples. Hence his fairy tales also contain a breath of the Arabian Nights.

Thus, although the island of Rhodes has lived a vicarious life, it has, in our eyes, remained connected with all former spiritual trends whose links have been cut. Let us enjoy the simple pleasures of these jokes and dreams, these wisdoms and notions, and thus be sure of understanding the island.—H. St.

