# The Myth of Botsaris, Between Tyrtaeus and Leonidas: Militaristic Poetry and Philhellenism

1. **Introduction**
   1. The historical facts

In 19th century Europe, few of the major figures of the Greek Revolution encountered such widespread renown as the Arvanite Markos Botsaris from the region of Souli. Many feats of arms were attributed to him both before and after 1821, until his glorious death on the battlefield in August 1823, in circumstances that earned him the sobriquet of the new Leonidas. Indeed, during a repeat Turkish offensive against Missolungi, having exited from the city with a few hundred companions (a detail that beckons the analogy with the ancient Spartan king), Botsaris fell on the enemy encampment at Carpenissa, armed with nothing but a dagger. Taken aback by the assault and uncertain as to the enemy’s numbers, the Turks fled and, in the confusion, managed to kill each other. It was a considerable defeat but, in the melee, Markos Botsaris, “the eagle of the Souliotes,” fell, struck on the forehead.

* 1. The early myth

Botsaris underwent a rapid process of mythologization in Greek folk songs, swiftly magnified on the pages of the main European newspapers. Claude Fauriel seems to have been astonished by the news, but by the time he heard, it was too late to record any compositions in his collection of folk songs, as he himself explains in a note that already portrays Botsaris as “victime d’un dévouement comparable à celui de Léonidas.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

While it is true that Niccolò Tommaseo, with the publication of *Canti greci* in 1842, was a late arrival, “privo della tempestività della raccolta di Fauriel,”[[2]](#footnote-2) he was able to take advantage of the passage of time to include the translation of one of the many songs that sprang up in honor of the hero of Souli.

Named “Marco Bozzari,” the text chosen by Tommaseo is famous for its incipit containing the topical imagery: “Fossi uccello a volare, a ire alto, / a veder di lontano la misera Messolongi, / come combattono i Greci con Turchi e Pascià!”, as well as the verse Ὁ Μάρκος ἐσκοτώθηκε· καὶ ἐσκότωσε καὶ χίλιους “Marco fu ucciso, ma n’uccise anco mille”[[3]](#footnote-3). In another version, to which Tommaseo also alludes, the dying hero addresses the mother of his child who is in Ancona, bidding her look after their little son and read him his letters.

Further proof of the reach of this hero’s myth in Italy comes from anthroponymy. The archive of the imperial royal Austrian provincial delegation of Vicenza documents the baptism of the son of Giuseppe Burba who was presented at the font with the name of Botzari Monte Baldo.[[4]](#footnote-4) The priest refused to baptize the newborn. Unable to tolerate the evocation of, firstly, a foreign hero like Botsaris, considered subversive by the establishment, and secondly, a site of Italian resistance against the Austrians during the first War of Independence (Monte Baldo is situated between Trento and Verona, where fighting took place between June and July 1848), he requested the intervention of the bishop.

I will now attempt to reconstruct the first stages in the creation and circulation of the mth of Botsaris in Italy. Time constraints force me to exclude consideration of the early contribution made by the figurative arts, but it is noteworthy that Giovanni Boggi’s portrait of the hero created for the series printed in Florence by the Salucci lithographers, dates back to 1825.

With regards to literature, a first attempt to examine the output on this subject was made by Elena Persico in the 1920 volume on Italian philhellenic literature.[[5]](#footnote-5) In that pioneering work, we find a list of the Italian philhellenic authors who wrote works dedicated to the eagle of the Souliotes. Some names are lacking, as Arnaldo Di Benedetto already assumed:[[6]](#footnote-6) for example, Domenico Castorina, author of a lengthy song with the title “Marco Bozzari” included in the collection *Nuova Grecia*, published in Turin in 1849 with a dedication to the king of Greece, Otto I, is missing, as is Agesilao Milano, to name a few.

In my current survey, however, I will focus only on the youthful production of the seminarian Giuseppe Arcangeli. This writer can be linked to the Tuscan provincial world of Giobertian catholicism, and an analysis of his work enables the reconstruction of a neglected page of Italian philhellenism, involving 19th century classical philologists working in Bologna, Pistoia, and Prato.

1. **Provincial philhellenism: Muzzi, Silvestri, and Arcangeli**

As soon as the news arrived of the deeds that took place at Carpenissa and the heroism of the Souliotes – all the way back in 1823 – the first Italian poet to be inspired by Botsaris was Luigi Muzzi of Prato, known above all as the first author of dedications in Italian rather than Latin. In 1825, he gave a public reading at the Bologna casino of a sonnet which he wrote two years earlier, bearing the title “Marco Botsaris,” in which the hero was commemorated as “the lion of Sparta, who with three hundred men killed thousands.” This is the first instance, although it is possible that Muzzi took inspiration from an earlier example, where we see the transformation of two hundred companions into three hundred and the explicit overlap of the modern episode with the ancient feat of Leonidas at Thermopylae, a motif that was missing from the Greek folk songs, which instead focused on the more general theme of a single man pitted against a thousand.

Another sonnet, “Alla Grecia,”dates to the same and has the author setting up the Greeks of 1821 as a model for contemporary Italians to follow in order to succeed in their own political battles.

It is clear that, in lauding contemporary Greece for having restored itself, for having been *reborn* (“quei delle Termopili vetusti”), here too the author was alluding, none too subtly, to Botsaris and his companions.

There is, however, another significant fact that must be highlighted. The first sonnet, dedicated to Botsaris and to the immortal theme of heroism in death, was approved for printing as part of the *Saggio di rime, prose e iscrizioni* collection (Bologna 1825). The second, however, with its title directly referencing revolutionary Greece, the first country to truly destabilized the order established by the congress of Vienna, was denied inclusion in the 1825 volume, unless broken up into two, in the footnotes and the appendix. And it was not by chance that it ended up being printed in the *Canzoniere per la Gioventù Italiana*, published in Lugano in 1834, an anthology of politically-oriented poetry by Italian authors from Dante to Manzoni. In those years, philhellenic writers, just like those who dedicated their work to domestic predicaments, often needed a foreign refuge, far from the reach of the censors.

Muzzi may be justly counted among those philhellenic writers also for his appeal of 1824,[[7]](#footnote-7) in which he urged Italian painters to abandon the subject of classical history in favor of contemporary Greece. In a 1825 issue of *Bollettino universale di scienze, lettere, arti e politica*, he wrote, referring to the painter Ludovico Lipparini: “Getta uno sguardo, o Lodovico, sulle pagine eterne della Grecia d’oggidì, e vi troverai ben altro che Milziade Temistocle e il Leone di Sparta.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Such neo-Greek enthusiasm, which went well beyond the limits of classicism and pointed to contemporary Greek paragons that were even loftier than the ancient ones, also informs two of his epigraphs dedicated to Botsaris, one of which reads as follows:

Marco Bòzzaris

Greco

angelo della strage

maggiore dell’antico Leonida.[[9]](#footnote-9)

We should also mention, in chronological order, the then twenty-five year old Terenzio Mamiani, author of the ode “In morte di Marco Botzaris,” written in 1824 and published in the *Rime volgari* under the pseudonym Arnaldo in 1829: “tutta Grecia ancor gli è poco tomba.”[[10]](#footnote-10) However, it is not through Mamiani that the Botsaris affair became known in the Tuscan province, and in particular in the Pisan seminary attended by the youthful Giuseppe Arcangeli between 1829 and 1830.

The intermediary in question was a churchman, the canon Giuseppe Silvestri, later chancellor of the prestigious Cicognini lyceum between 1831 and 1842. In the *Nuova raccolta di epigrafi italiane di autori diversi*, published in Rome in 1828, we find one of his epigraphs on the subject first broached by Muzzi, namely, the death of the hero of the Souliotes, following the ancient example of Leonidas.

Unlike Muzzi, Silvestri kept the true number of two hundred men, instead of the convenient alteration to three hundred, but like him, he emphasized the contrast between the single man and “le mille bocche di morte” of the enemy, from the Greek folk songs that reached Tommaseo, and declared Botsaris to be the “novello Leonida.”

Among Silvestri’s pupils at the seminary in Pistoia, which included severeal illustrious names of the contemporary cultural milieu in Prato,[[11]](#footnote-11) was one Giuseppe Arcangeli (1807–1844). Destined to become a liberal interpreter of catholicism inspired by Gioberti, once he had taken holy orders, Arcangeli would go on to teach Greek and the humanities for a lengthy period at the Cicognini lyceum in Prato. He combined his studies of the ancient world, often in relation to his work as an educator, with a conscientious commitment to politics. As a child of the times, a passion for liberty was the basis of many literary essays, such as the translation of the famous elegy by the ancient poet Tyrtaeus, dedicated to the beauty of death in war for one’s homeland. Arcangeli completed this translation as a twenty year old during his studies at the seminary in Pistoia[[12]](#footnote-12) and it was later published in 1838 in the volume *Saggio di versioni poetiche dal greco e altri versi*.

The addition of Arcangeli to the survey of Italian philhellenism is not new. Elena Persico paints a rather positive portrait of him, although she then reappraised his literary merits: “natura mobile, geniale, viaggiò, poi fu in parte propenso alle novità politiche del ’48 in Toscana, moderato in politica, classico in letteratura, giornalista, collaboratore dell’*Antologia* e di moltissimi altri giornali”, and rightfully underlines that this young seminary student from Tuscany “ci mostra che le notizie di Grecia arrivavano fino a lui.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

2.1. **The “translation” of the hymn to Botsaris**

The work presented as a translation of Rigas’ hymn “Marco Bozzaris” in the posthumous edition of Arcangeli’s works edited by his friend Enrico Bindi in 1857, dates back to the end of the 1820s, the years of his attendance at the Pistoia seminary.

The text mixes elements present in various versions of the Greek folk songs with unmistakable erudite additions that reveal the author’s classical education. Great prominence is also given to Christian inspiration (“È la spada sua forza, è la croce / sua bandiera, è suo dio libertà” for ex., in vv. 23–24).

The typical folk song motif of one against a thousand (“voi fuggite da un solo, voi mille!”, in v. 32 and repeated in v. 48 “de’ tuoi mille un guerrier trionfò”) was in the text later translated by Tommaseo (“Marco fu ucciso, ma n’uccise anco mille”) as well as in Silvestri’s epigraph. Muzzi’s sonnet likewise made hyperbolic reference to thousands (“leon di Sparta, coi trecento che ucciser le migliaia”).

On the other hand, the extended references to Thermopylae and to Xerxes, as well as to Leonidas, link back to the author’s classical background. Such references had already been experimented with by Muzzi and Silvestri and had become highly topical in the philhellenic Europe of the 1820s (“Ha la Grecia un Leonida ancora” in v. 18, and even more pertinently: “per mano d’Achille / i Tersiti non denno morir” in vv. 35–36).[[14]](#footnote-14)

The twenty year old Arcangeli was endebted to Muzzi for the Greek theme and, needless to say, to his teacher, Giuseppe Silvestri. Nevertheless, it is hard to identify the original text very freely translated by Arcangeli, who did not know modern Greek. The idea of the *imitation* of vernacular Greek, indeed, was surely a novel and original feature compared to his two precursors. Persico notes on the subject:

A possible alternative solution to this issue can be found if one looks at the first edition, that of 1838 in which, as I have been able to verify, the name of Rigas does not appear at all and the song is presented as a translation from modern Greek, without any mention of the author. Nor can it be Solomòs, author between 1823 and 1824 of a poem, left unfinished, dedicated to the death of the hero, in which the chorus’ lament for Markos’ death was compared to the lament for Hector in the *Iliad*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

It is likely that the compilers of the 1857 edition of the works of Arcangeli, in particular Bindi, had erroneously linked the song dedicated to Botsaris with the name of Rigas, considered the forefather of the Revolutionary military songs genre.

The latter had acquired great renown in Italy after the successful translation of the *Θούριος* by Niccolini in 1823 and furthermore, among Arcangeli’s unpublished manuscripts in the Roncioniana library, there is one in which the hymn attributed to Rigas Δεῦτε παῖδες των Ελλήνων has been transcribed by hand, not without some hesitancy with respect to the accents.[[16]](#footnote-16) The title, written hurriedly, reads “Canto di guerra greco.” Here too it is difficult to say what Arcangeli’s source was. Clarity on this question would enable us to trace the origin of provincial Tuscan and clerical-focused philhellenism, which has been somewhat neglected thus far.

But what kind of circulation did Arcangeli’s song “Marco Botzaris” achieve?

A survey of the magazines of the time reveals mostly positive reviews. For example, one opinion may be read in the review that appeared in the *Rivista Viennese. Collezione mensile di articoli originali, traduzioni in versi e in prosa, col testo a fronte e senza (anno secondo, tomo I)*, published in Vienna in 1839 under the direction of Giovanni Battista Bolza.

Why should the ode have neapolitan features? The poem that the reviewer casually cites, with a wink that assumes its easy recognizability by the reader, is the civic ode “Sei pur bella con gli astri sul crine” by Gabriele Rossetti, inspired by the neapolitan revolts of 1820 and very popular among the patriots of Campania and others. This is another clue in favor of a very free translation, or perhaps a re-writing, or an original neo-Greek text.

2.2. **The canticle “In morte di Gregorio, patriarca di Costantinopoli”**

The song for Botsaris was not the only expression of the twenty-year-old Arcangeli’s philhellenism. The Tuscan seminary student was also the author of the canticle “In morte di Gregorio, patriarca di Costantinopoli,” signed Ιωσηφ Αρχαγγελλίος, in which Persico perceives a “document exhibiting a curious deformation of the dominant philhellenic ideas” but sees no literary merit.[[17]](#footnote-17) The period of the poem’s composition was immediately following the 1827 victory of Navarino.

The historical value of the poem is, in fact, considerable, as the text provides the absolutely original interpretation of the Greek Revolution by a young cleric in the Tuscan provinces at the end of the 1820s, when philhellenism had lost its liberal connotations and could be prudently voiced even in church circles, which had been traditionally hostile environments to such ideas. It is true that the Greeks remained schismatics, who had to suffer in order to redeem themselves, on a kind of purgatorial path that the Dantean tone of the canticle attempts to recreate. But the viewpoint was certainly conciliatory and favorable to the Greek cause, unlike the basically suspicious approach taken by the Church of Leo XII (1823–1829), which followed the much more receptive years of Pius VII and his secretary of state Consalvi.

1. Conclusions

A re-evaluation of the Italian fortunes of the myth of Markos Botsaris allows for a clearer picture of the geography of Italian philhellenism in the 19th century and for a re-appraisal of the scope of Pugliese Carratelli’s otherwise substantive claim that, with the exception of Amedeo Peyron, “most of the Hellenist scholars in early nineteenth-century Italy were indifferent to the sufferings and aspirations of their Greek contemporaries.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Domenico Castorina from Catania gave subtle expression to this attitude. Although not a classical philologist, in his dedication to king Otto in his collection of folk songs from 1849, Castorina felt the need to write that he found comfort in the thought that “the recent subjects do not undermine the minds of readers with too much modernity, estimating Marco Bozzari to be as ancient as Achilles.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Compared to this cautious approach, typical of the classicism that, following Greek independence, had chosen a commemorative and erudite outlook, the work of philologists such as Luigi Muzzi, Giuseppe Silvestri, and Giuseppe Arcangeli – the latter two tied to the provincial environment of Prato – appears more courageous. Between 1823 and 1827, in the midst of the War of Independence, they saw in Botsaris a hero equal to or greater than the ancient Leonidas.

Silvestri and Arcangeli, moreover, are voices from within the Church who did not align themselves with the condemnation of the Greek Revolution voiced by the Church hierarchy. Muzzi too gave further proof of his philhellenism in March 1831, translating into verse, with the help of his friend Giovanni Galvani from Zakynthos, Solomòs’s hymn to liberty, without being able, however, to publish it until 1848, due to censorship.[[20]](#footnote-20) When it did make it into print, it was again in Prato, a peripheral community, but definitely one to be re-evaluated in the complex geography of Italian philhellenism in the first decades of the 19th century.

1. “Au moment de livrer à l’impression ces feuilles écrites il y a plusieurs mois, les papiers publics annoncent la mort de Markos Botsaris, victime d’une dévouement comparable à celui de Léonidas. Puisse une si grande perte n’être pas irréparable pour la Grèce” (Fauriel 1824, 283). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Di Benedetto 1999, 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tommaseo 1842, 431–432. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ASVi, fondo IRDPVi, b. 35, fasc. 78. See Valente 2017, 14 (<http://hdl.handle.net/10579/9873>). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “The death of this hero, the purest, most radiant figure of the Greek revolution ignites even more the sympathies of Europe and Italy: his expedition is compared to that of Leonidas, his ‘palikari’ to the famous three hundred” (Persico 1920, 49). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Di Benedetto 1999, 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Caterina Spetsieri Beschi 1986, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Luigi Muzzi, “Article title,” *Bollettino universale di scienze, lettere, arti e politica* 59, 97 (29 July 1825): 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Muzzi 1848, 22. The two epigraphs, already printed in the fifth epigraphic century, were re-published in the booklet containing the translation of Solomòs’ hymn to liberty (Prato 1848). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Mamiani dedicated another song to the hero from Souli in 1827, the *Invocazione dello stratego di Missolungi*, heroic in its sentiments but weighed down by persistent petrarchan imitation (Della Pergola 1899, 98–98). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I will limit myself here to mentioning Atto Vannucci, a churchman who, first an exponent of liberal ideas, then later infatuated with the revolutionary aspirations of 1848, came to the point of abandoning the priesthood and later, after much wandering through Europe, became a senator of the Kingdom of Italy. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For these and other biographical details, Arcangeli’s obituary proves a useful reading. After his premature death from cholera, his obituary was written by Filippo Ugolini (1855). See also Treves 1961. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Elena Persico 1920, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It is evident right from the start that the motif of Botsaris as the “new Leonidas” had entered into philhellenic repertory and would enjoy lengthy success. We find an echo of it, for example, in the composition *Lord Byron at Missolungi* by the Sicilian poet Giuseppina Turrisi Colonna, to whom Scalora has recently drawn attention 2018, 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Persico 1920, 70–71. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Amantos 1935, 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “What about its literary merit? It has none, or almost none, despite its considerable informative merit, as a tracer of the movement and extension of philhellenic ideas” (Persico 1920, 70–71). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Pugliese Carratelli 1986, 115. Peyron premised his essay *Idee della storia antica della Grecia* to the work of Angelo Brofferio *Antica e nuova Grecia* (1844). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Castorina 1849, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Muzzi 1848, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)