

# 12 IMPORTANT TRADITIONS IN GREECE

## 1.EPITAPH



Good Friday is an eminently mournful day that commemorates the Passion of Christ in all of Greece. Good Friday in Greece is both the most solemn holiday of the year, and the most beautiful. In every church throughout the whole country, Good Friday begins with bells. But not the joyous church bells we hear every Sunday and holidays — the bell is a mourning bell, ringing a single ring at regular intervals all day long. It is calling us to the Greek Easter Epitaph. Inside every church is the Easter epitaph, the symbolic funeral bier of Jesus Christ. It is covered completely with flowers. In the past the women of the towns and villages used to stay up all night to decorate the Epitaph with flowers. From the morning and throughout the day, there is a line outside every church as people wait to pay their respects. People approach the beautifully decorated Easter Epitaph and kiss the icon of Christ, which has been taken down from the cross and wrapped in linen. In many places, little children will pass beneath the Easter Epitaph. Public offices are closed, and in most communities stores also are closed until midday. This way, everyone has the opportunity to visit the Easter Epitaph. It is the utmost day of grief in Greece and fasting is kept in all homes, eating something simple without even oil. Each community has its own customs as to when the Easter Epitaph is brought on a procession, but usually it is after dark. The streets surrounding each church are closed to make way for the holy processions- large sections of cities and villages alike close to traffic, and if you take a walk you will see not one procession, but several. The clergy and the altar boys, in beautiful liturgical robes, follow the Easter Epitaph- carried by young men of the congregation — as it makes its way through the streets. Everyone else follows, each holding a candle. The streets fill with candlelight and the scent of flowers. It is an unforgettable sight. Some people do not join the procession in the streets but they go out on their balconies to watch instead, also holding candles and adding to the beauty of the scene.

## 2.LAZARUS CAROLS

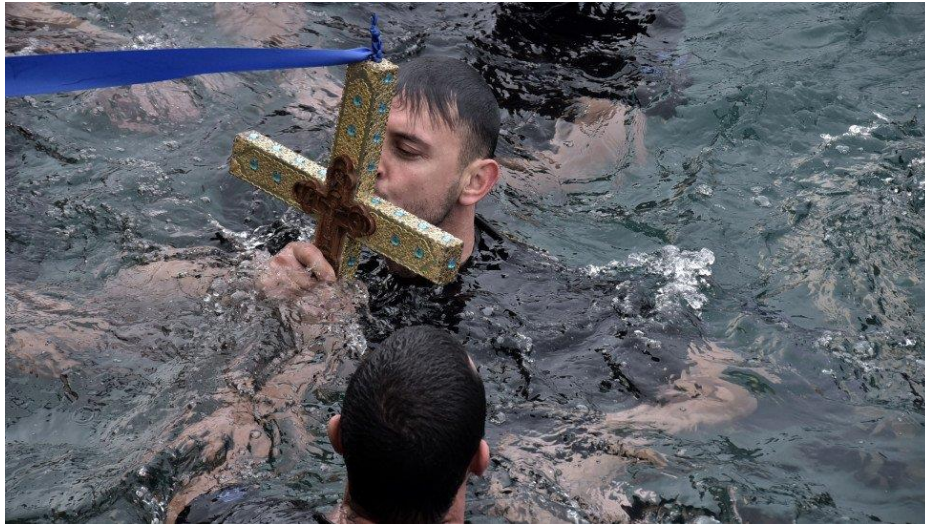


This tradition takes place in Trikala and some areas in Macedonia. Little girls (only) take their baskets which are decorated with flowers and wander around the city or village on the Saturday of Lazarus, one week before Easter, and sing the carols about Lazarus so that they will collect eggs and goodies for Easter. They traditionally use the eggs they collect as Easter eggs, which are dyed on Thursday before Easter.



### 3.EPIPHANY





Epiphany- Theofania in Greek- is a Christian celebration, celebrating the baptism of Jesus Christ in Jordan River by John the Baptist. It is the day when water is sanctified. It is celebrated on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, and it is the last celebration of the Christmas period. The name *Θεοφάνεια* (Theofania in Greek) means the emergence, the appearing of the Holy Trinity, that took place, according to the scripts. The Holy Spirit appeared as a dove, and therefore a dove is set free during the service at the church on this day.

In the Greek Orthodox Church Epiphany is greatly celebrated, thousands of people are gathered after the Service on the banks of the rivers, on the beaches or at ports, where the Bishops throw a cross into the cold water and Christians fall into the water to catch the cross. Whoever catches it is considered blessed and traditionally receives a present by the Bishop, usually a gold cross.



## 4.VASILOPITA



Vasilopita is a very popular tradition in Greece. The Tradition Comes from Agios Vasilios (Saint Basil). Agios Vasilios is Santa Claus in Greece. When he was a Bishop in Casarea in present Turkey), he used to help the poor, after taking donations from the rich. We celebrate Agios Vasilios on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January. Vasilopita-meaning the pie of Vasilios- is a cake or traditionally a pie, where a coin is hidden. After the pie is cut and divided, whoever finds the coin in his piece is considered to have a lucky year!

## 5.BAPTISM AND NAME-GIVING



Baptism begins at the splint of the church, where the parents hand the baby to the godmother or godfather. The name of the baby is announced there by the godparent. After the baby is undressed, the godparent applies pure olive oil all over the baby and then the priest dives the baby three times into the font. The priest then applies holy essence on the forehead, the palms and the feet of the baby and cuts some of his/her hair. Then he puts the Cross around the baby's neck and the baby is ready to be dressed with the special white underwear and the clothes that the godparent has bought. Special ribbons with a cross are pinned on the guests' lapels. They signify that they were present and eye-witnessed the Christening that took place in the church. When the baby is dressed, the godparent holds him/her again. A big candle and three smaller candles are lit. They are usually given to small children to hold while the godfather with the baby, the priest and the child holding the big candle go round the font three times. When the ceremony is over, the mother usually bows and kisses the godparent's hand as a sign of respect and she is then given the baby. At the exit of the church they all wish the parents and the godparents, they get sweets and sugarplums. The family and the godparents take photos and they all go to the reception that follows, usually at a restaurant. For three days after the Baptism, the baby should not be given a bath. The water of the 1st bath after the baptism should be kept and thrown into a river, into the sea, or it could be used to water the plants. It must not be thrown down the drain in any way! Tradition suggests that the godmother takes the baby to church for the next 3 Sundays in a row, so as the baby will receive Holy Communion. During the service the big candle that was lit on the day of the baptism has to be lit. On the 3rd Sunday, after the Holy Communion, it should be left in the church. Orthodox Religion suggests that godparents should carry out baptisms of only boys or only girls. People who have the same godparent are not allowed to marry each other.

Another interesting fact is that in Greece, some names are very common. This comes from an ancient tradition that was intended to ensure the continuation of a name. The firstborn is named after a grandparent: if it is a boy, he takes the name of his paternal grandfather. If it is a girl, she takes the name of the maternal grandmother. It is also common that the first child is named after the father's parents, regardless of whether it is a boy or a girl. It is not uncommon to find cousins with the same names, though they can be adapted or nicknamed differently to avoid confusion. In fact, the child doesn't have a name until he or she is baptized. Until then, the baby is called... "baby".



## 6.CARNIVAL



The Carnival season in Greece, known as «Apokries,» is a period which traditionally begins ten weeks before Greek Orthodox Easter, and ends with “Clean Monday”, the first day of Lent. Usually, the carnival period takes place in February and/or early March, and lasts for three weeks prior to Lent. So in total a celebration of twenty-two days, including 3 weekends. During those three carnival weeks there are many private parties and masquerades, as well as parades and public events organized by municipalities and schools all over Greece. In Greece people use two words for “carnival”. The Greek word Αποκριά (Apokria) literally means ‘without meat’. The word “karnavali”, obviously a word without Greek roots, and coming from the Latin ‘carnem levare’, also means ‘without meat’. On the Thursday of the second week of Carnivale,

Greeks celebrate the so called "Tsiknopempti". On this particular Thursday everyone grills and eats meat. The smell of grilled meat, which fills every neighborhood, is called "tsikna"! Most Greeks gather with friends at home or go to restaurants, in order to "tsiknisoun"! This means, they will "eat meat, smell the "tsikna", drink and dance"! On Tsiknopempti, you can also see many masquerades. The last Sunday of carnival the biggest Greek parade takes place in the city of Patras. The "Patrino karnavali" is the largest event of its kind in Greece and one of the biggest in Europe. Giant decorated cars and coaches, colorful dresses and figures will fill the city streets, while dancing on music all day. If you want to experience something as the "Brazilian carnival", but in Greece, then Patras is the place to be! Thousands of carnival participants from all over the country come to Patras to dance, while holding torches, in the streets of the city. When the carnival festive season is over, the period of fasting begins, until Easter Sunday. But on the first day of fasting, do not forget to participate in the "Clean Monday" celebration – a day of joy and excitement in Greece and a day to fly your kite!

## 7.RAGOUTSARIA



Ragoutsaria is celebrated from the 6<sup>th</sup> till the 8<sup>th</sup> of January in Kastoria (Macedonia). It is a revival of the ancient rituals attributed to Dionysos, one of the Olympian Gods in the Greek Mythology. It was done to honor Nature, which would be reborn in Spring. Locals or tourists are gathered in the streets celebrating, accompanied by music played using traditional instruments. The name itself derives from the Latin "Rogatores", that is beggars, as dressed up they ask for treats, in order to scare evil spirits away. The tradition dates back at the times of Dorians, when people dressed in animal skins and wearing masks tried to get rid of the bad things happening to them at those times. It is a rare example of the historical continuation of our customs in our land. In antiquity people were dressed as animals, eg cows, deer etc.



## 8.ROUKETOPOLEMOS (Easter Rocket War)



Rouketopolemos (literally "rocket war") is the name of a local traditional event held annually at Easter in the town of Vrontados on the Greek island of Chios. As a variation of the Greek custom of throwing fireworks during the celebration of the service at midnight before Easter Sunday, two rival church congregations in the town perform a "rocket war" by firing tens of thousands of home-made rockets across

town, with the objective of hitting the bell tower of the church of the other side. The rockets are wooden sticks loaded with a propellant mixture containing gunpowder, and are launched from grooved platforms. The two rival parishes are St. Mark's and Panaghia Ereithiani, the respective churches built on two hilltops about 400 meters away from each other. Direct hits on each belfry are supposedly counted on the next day to determine the winner, but each parish invariably claims victory over the other. The result of this apparent disagreement is that both parishes agree to settle the score next year, and the rivalry is thus perpetuated. The church buildings themselves and the nearby buildings have to be extensively boarded up and protected with metal sheets and mesh for the occasion. Several inhabitants of Vrontados regularly express their dismay at the explosive nature of the custom, but it is a source of significant tourist revenue for the area. The origin of this event is unclear, but local tradition holds that it goes back to the Ottoman era. According to local lore it was earlier performed with real cannons, until Ottoman authorities prohibited their use in 1889. Potential visitors should note that the event is held on Orthodox Easter Day [as defined by the Julian calendar] which falls later in the year than the Easter dates commonly used in the West.

## **9.AVGOMACHIES (Egg fights)**





The traditional Eggfight turns into a real war in some regions in Greece! The roots of this custom come from the Pontian Greeks. They brought it with them to the mainland after the Pontian genocide by the Turks, when they had to flee their land. It symbolizes the Resurrection of Christ and the fight between good and evil. The preparation begins as early as December, when the fighters start to collect the eggs and put aside the most durable and strong ones. The basic rule of the fight is that the eggs are chicken eggs. The mighty eggfighters collect as many as 200 eggs at the village traditional café, before the beginning of the fight. There are always disputes about the origin of the eggs, as many claim that some of the opponents try to cheat by bringing turkey eggs to the fight! Usually there are expert judges, that is vets, who check the credibility of the eggs! The eggfighters check the egg by the sound. They tap the egg on their front tooth. The more sheer and clear the sound, the more durable the egg! The winner is he who is left with the most intact eggs! If you want to participate in an eggfight, you have to be in Greece at Easter time. The eggs are traditionally dyed red, symbolizing the blood of Jesus Christ.



## 10. JUDAS ON FIRE



A peculiar custom in many regions in Greece is the burning of Judas. On the night of Anastasi (Resurrection, that is on Saturday night) the believers punish Judas , setting his effigy in fire. It is a manmade effigy made of straw and cloth. As early as Saturday morning, the boys of the village start collecting wood, which they gather and pile up near the church of the village, usually visible from all sides of it. On the top of the pile they place the traitor, that is the effigy of Judas and they wait until the Easter service. When the priest says “Χριστός Ανέστη!” (Christos Anesti), which in Greek means “Christ has resurrected”, they set fire and Judas is burnt! On some islands the burning of Judas takes place in the sea, as the effigy is placed on a raft!

## 11.15<sup>th</sup> OF AUGUST



The 15<sup>th</sup> of August in Greece (Dekapentavgoustos) is considered to be the Easter of summer. We celebrate the death of Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. It may sound odd to celebrate death, but in the Orthodox religion She did not die, but was uplifted to Heaven. Every village in Greece has a church dedicated to the "Sleeping of

Virgin Mary". And it is a time of celebration. With a lot of food, traditional dances, depending on the region. Here are some traditions.

In Siatista (Macedonia) , pilgrims ride horses, which they have previously ornated, they go to a nearby monastery to pay tribute to the holy icon and when they go back to the village they begin the celebration!

Patmos is called the island of the Apocalypse, as John wrote the Apocalypse there. The monks of the monastery take the Epitaph around the island and the people follow the procession.

In the small island of Koufonisi, the celebration is unique! It takes place on the boats! The inhabitants and the visitors board little boats and they all sail to the church of the Virgin Mary, located on a nearby island. On the way back, a race takes place, as the small boats compete which is going to reach the shore first! What follows is a traditional feast with music, dancing and seafood!

Something strange happens every 15<sup>th</sup> of August on the island of Kefalonia, as little snakes appear in the church and surround the icon of Virgin Mary. They are harmless and they are thought to bring good luck to the island and the ones who touch them. The snakes disappear after the 15<sup>th</sup> of August!

The most famous and popular Panagia (virgin Mary) in Greece is the one in Tinos island. Panagia in Greek means the most sacred of all. In Tinos the icon is thought to be miraculous and every 15<sup>th</sup> of August thousands of people gather to pay tribute to the mother of Christ, who is considered the mother of all. Sailors of the Greek Navy carry the icon around the narrow streets of the town and people walk up to the church on their knees, to thank Her for the favor She has done.



## **12. THE EVIL EYE AND SPITTING**



Perhaps the most notorious superstition that Greece is the belief that the evil eye is a curse (matiasma) cast by an envious or jealous person. To protect yourself against it, Greeks believe you must wear a charm. This is what the famous blue pieces of glass with an eye painted on are for. Another way to keep evil away from you is by ...spitting... If you have seen my *Big Fat Greek Wedding*, you are familiar with this. Greeks believe spitting chases the devil and evil away. Greeks do not actually spit but actually say ' *ftou, ftou, ftou* ', three times, no less! It is common to spit when someone mentions a bad piece of news or a death, when someone comments on the beauty or health of someone, or even when complimenting a baby or a child, so that the comment doesn't give the person the evil eye. If none of this works, there is even a prayer one can say, to get rid of the evil eye, which causes to the "victim" headaches, dizziness or sleepiness!