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**FOLK POETRY OF MODERN  
GREECE**

# FOLK POETRY OF MODERN GREECE

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
CAMBRIDGE  
LONDON · NEW YORK · NEW ROCHELLE  
MELBOURNE · SYDNEY

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1980  
First paperback edition 2004

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Beaton, Roderick.  
Folk poetry of modern Greece.

Bibliography: p.  
Includes index.

1. Folk poetry, Greek (Modern) - History and criticism.  
I. Title.

PA5255.B4 398.2'09495 79-7644

ISBN 0 521 22853 0 hardback  
ISBN 0 521 60420 6 paperback

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0521604206 - Folk Poetry of Modern Greece - Roderick Beaton  
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*For my mother*

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## Preface

There is no lack of terms to describe what I have chosen to call the folk poetry of modern Greece. Folk songs, ballads, epics, epic ballads, traditional songs, oral songs, oral tradition, oral poetry, all are widely used and, at least in a general sense, clearly enough understood. The expression 'oral literature' has gained ground in recent years through efforts, particularly of anthropologists, to find a blanket term which would include all the others, although there are signs now that the general distinction between 'oral' and other kinds of literature is not as clearcut as was once believed. (As will be seen later, not all the songs discussed in this book are unequivocally 'oral'.) The more old-fashioned 'folk poetry' does not of course cover *all* types of unwritten 'literary' expression – the oral poems attributed to Homer, for instance, were surely sung to entertain the pre-classical Greek aristocracy rather than the 'folk' – but it does truly describe the oral songs of modern Greece, in that all of them seem to have been produced away from centres of power and learning. The political and social attitudes they embody are unsympathetic to authority, whether Greek, Turkish or ecclesiastical, and in their language and cultural referents they lie at the opposite extreme from the archaising book-culture of Byzantium which has dominated religious, political and scientific writing up to the present day. And I have referred in my title to 'poetry' rather than to 'song' only because there has been no space here to attempt to do justice to the vast range of music which is still to be found all over Greece and which raises a great many fascinating problems of its own. It must not be forgotten, however, that all of this poetry is in fact song, and that until the collectors began to write it down, it had no existence outside the sung performance.

This book is the result of field research carried out in Greece between 1974 and 1977. A fair share of the work was also done in libraries, in particular that of the British School at Athens and the Gennadion



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### *Preface*

Library, Athens - the one especially memorable for its congenial atmosphere, the other for an outstanding collection of works on Greece. As far as possible the facts on which I have based my analysis of folk poetry in Greece come from published sources; but the arguments and conclusions in this book are largely based on experience, listening to Greek folk poetry and song in tavernas and cafés, at village weddings and *paniyíria*, and taking part so far as I was able.

Very many people whose names do not appear in the list of published references have aided and abetted me in different ways, and I would like to record my gratitude to Dr Hector Catling, Mr Roderick Conway Morris, Mrs Litsa Dalla, Mr Markos Dragoumis, Mr Paul Halstead, Manolis and Renée Philippakis, Miss Domna Samiou, Dr Philip Sherrard, and the villagers, singers and musicians of many places in Greece and Cyprus. I am grateful also to Professor Meraklis, Director of the Folk Museum and Archive, University of Ioannina, for permission to quote the extracts which appear in Chapter 4; to Dr Ruth Finnegan who very kindly read and commented on draft sections of this book; to Mr Yorgos Ioannou in Athens and Mr Theodoros Papadopoulos in Nicosia for help in specific areas of my research; to Dr Michael Herzfeld and Dr Michael Jeffreys, both of whom allowed me access to unpublished material of their own; and, by no means least, to the Scottish Education Department, the Greek Ministry of Education, and the Ouranis Foundation in Athens, who have financed successive stages of my work. With sadness I have to record the death in June 1979 of Stavros Papastavrou, who first encouraged me to research in the field of modern Greek studies, and who was for many years a patient supervisor and valued friend. This book is offered as a tribute to his memory.

My thanks are due, finally, to Dr Margaret Alexiou, to whose unstinting support and generous criticism the appearance of this book in its final form owes a great debt. Needless to say, all errors, omissions and misguided flights of fancy are my responsibility alone.

*Birmingham 1979*

R.M.B.

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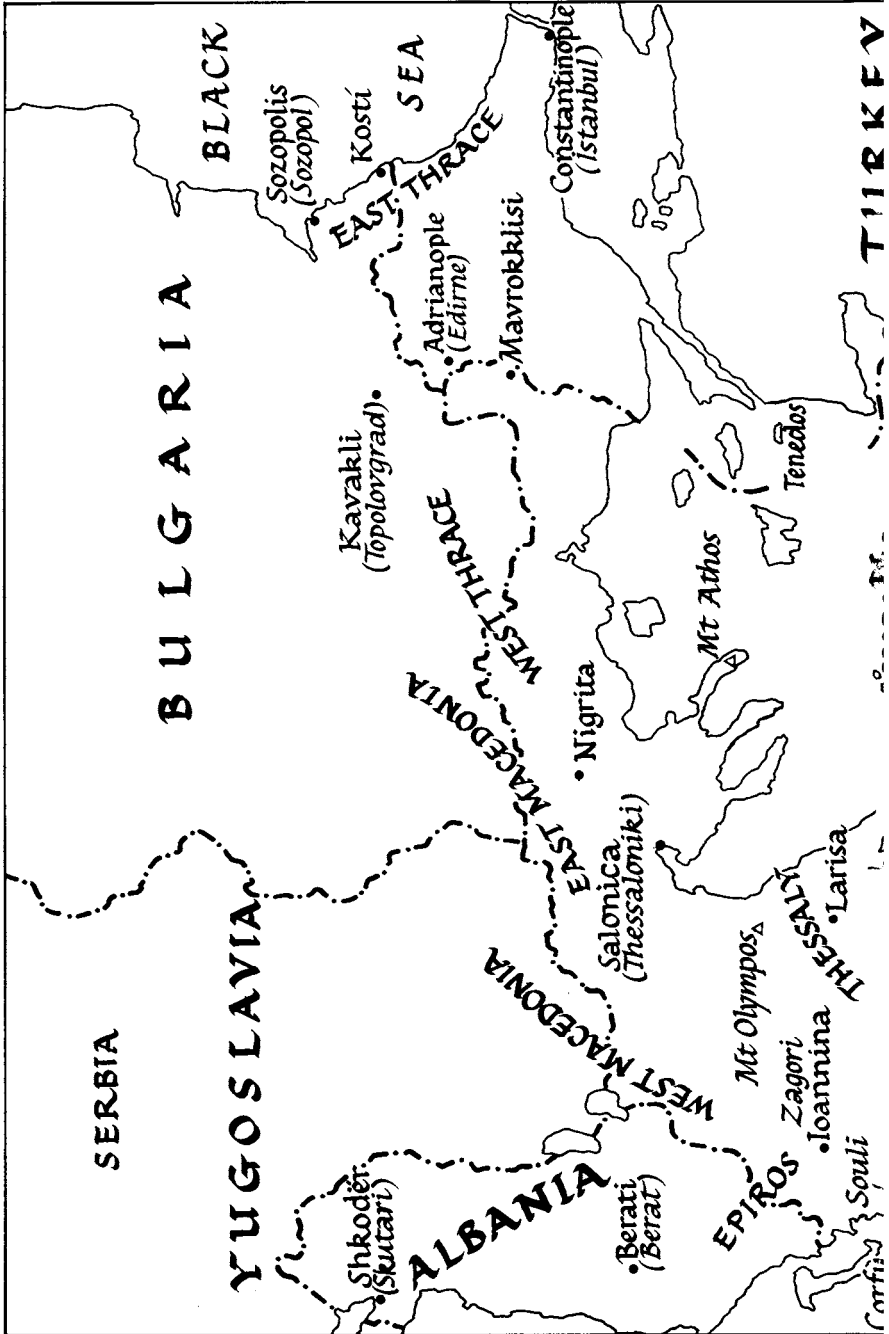
A nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same  
people living in the same place . . . Or also  
living in different places.

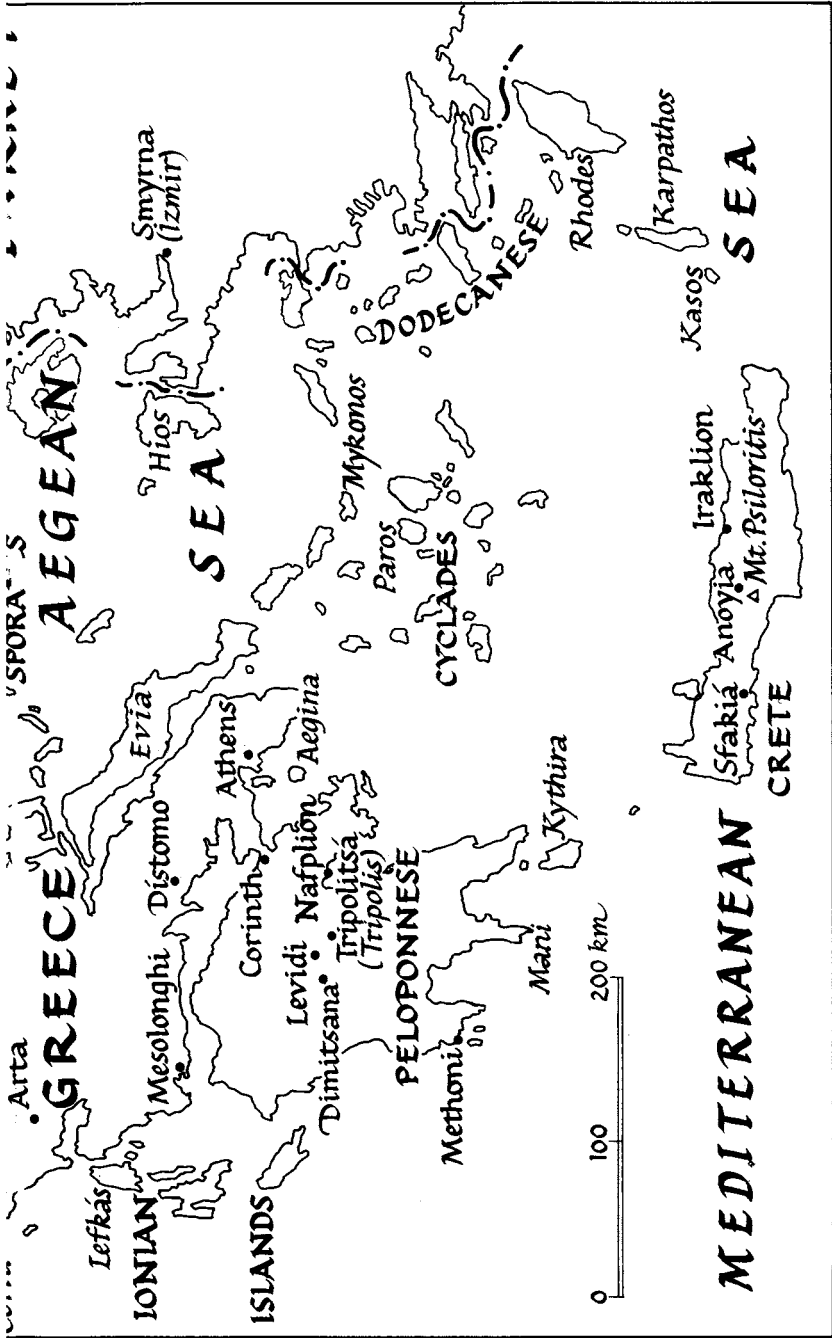
James Joyce, *Ulysses*

Ὅ ἐνας τὸ λέει ἔτσ' ὁ ἄλλος τὸ λέει ἀλλιῶς.  
Μάστορη τὸ τραγοῦδ' δὲν ἔχ'.

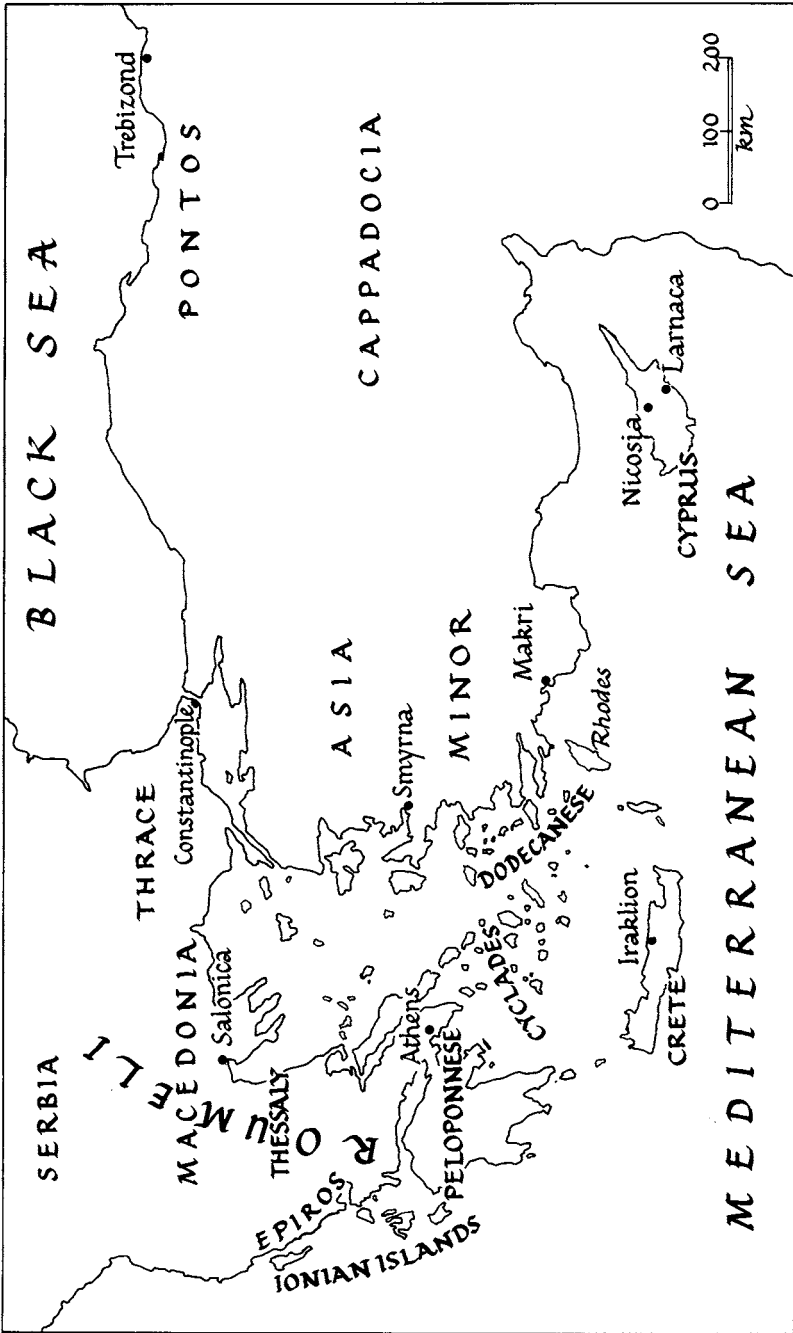
That's how one man tells it, another will tell  
it differently. In song no one has the last  
word.

A singer from Kostí, East Thrace





Map 1. Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean.



Map 2. Greece, the Southern Balkans, and Asia Minor.