

APPENDIX 5

Jason Melissinos – *O Karaghiozis sfoungaras* – Hydra – 19 May 2018

Greece has a long-standing popular tradition of shadow theatre performance. The plays are satirical and humorous, and feature various “types” of people from Greek society. The central figure is a wily trickster – Karaghiozis [from the Turkish “black eye”] – who mocks authority and has vulgar and priapic characteristics. The millennial roots of this art are attested by a medieval text from Cairo with shadow plays by Ibn Daniyal (c. 1100). For our Hydra conference we were able to bring from Athens our colleague, the noted Karaghiozis player Jason Melissinos, who prepared for us a play entitled “Ο Καραγκιόζης σφουγγαράς” – “Karaghiozis the Sponge Fisher”.

We set up the screen on open ground at the harbourside, a short while before the sun went down. The municipality had set out seating for us. The word had gone around the schools, and the harbour was an exciting bustle of children and parents and elders of the island. The atmosphere was entirely magical. For musicians we had members of the SOAS Rebetiko Band in attendance, with a small repertoire of sponge fishing songs.

The play had a clear social content – the Mediterranean sea is in danger from pollution and global warming, and we all have to do what we can to protect the marine environment. At the end of the play Karaghiozis extracted a solemn promise from all the children that they would help to do this. The performance included the traditional figures of the shadow tradition – the sultan Ali Pasha, his vizier Hajiavatis, the peasant Barba Yorgo, and many others – and it also featured Karaghiozis’ wife Karaghiozaina, who (as in the well-known story from Simi) takes the bold step of donning a diving suit and fetching sponges from the sea bed.

Jason is himself a mine of information regarding sponge culture in the Mediterranean, and we are hoping that he will present a formal paper at our next conference. For the moment he left us with this thought. There is one sponge that you would definitely *not* wish to buy from a sponge fisher. Aboard the boats, when at sea the toilet consisted of planking extended from the rear of the vessel. Since there was no toilet paper, the sailors used a sponge on a rope to clean their bottoms; when they had done, the sponge was left to trail in the water to clean itself.



Figure 1: Traditional figures of the Karaghiozis shadow theatre [Photo: E.E.]



Figure 2: Jason Melissinos prepares for the show, Harbourside, Hydra, May 2018. [Photo: E.E.]



Figure 3: Figures of the Karaghiozis shadow theatre: the Mermaid, King Neptune, the Donkey, and Karaghiozaina in diving suit. [Photo: E.E.]