Between Young and Old Greek Orthodox Christians: Saint Worship and dance as offering to a Saint

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The paper reconstructs what is remembered about saint worship practiced in the Rhodian highland village of Istrios. Istrian memory reveals a religious practice that included dance as a form of promise (taximo) and offering (tama) to Saint Merkourios, particularly by Istrian mothers and their role in assisting to cure their children of illness. The paper introduces the presence of dancing as a form of promise and offering to worship a saint, describing in detail how Istrian mothers performed the dance in a Holy shrine atypically located in a cemetery chapel.

1 Saint Merkourios is not as widely recognised as Saint Dhimitrios or Saint George but he presides with them in the Orthodox religious calendar as a warrior saint. My gatekeeper John (see Figure 1) believes he is of Syrian Orthodox origin. Saint Merkourios was born with the name Philopater in the city of Eskenos in Cappadocia in 224 AD. Shortly after his birth, his father, who was a Scythian officer in the Roman army, had his family baptised after seeing a dream of God telling him that Philopater would become His servant. After his baptism, Philopater was given the name Merkourios. Like his father, Merkourios also became a Scythian officer in the Roman army. When the Berbers attacked Rome, Merkourios fought in the battle and was given a second sword by the Archangel Michael, killing the king of the Berbers. This is why he is also known as Abu-Seifein — the holder of both a military and divine sword. The Roman Emperor Trajanus Decius promoted Merkourios to the rank of military commander (stratelates) after the victory. The Emperor began his persecution of Christians a year before the war against the Berbers and offered sacrifices to the Goddess Artemis that Merkourios did not want to participate in. With the encouragement of the Archangel Michael, Merkourios declared his faith in Christianity to the Emperor. Merkourios was then stripped of his military rank and placed in prison. He was tortured but continued to pray as the Archangel Michael came to him in his dreams and appeared and healed his wounds. Emperor Decius then sent Merkourios to Caesarea. Because the tortures in Caesarea also did not succeed, Decius had Merkourios beheaded in 250 AD. After his martyrdom, at age twenty-five, he was revered in the East as a warrior saint. Saint Merkourios is reputed to have appeared at various times in history to lend his sword to Christian causes, notably with Saint George and Saint Dhimitrios, at Antioch during the First Crusade on November 25, 1097. According to Eastern legend, one hundred and thirteen years after his martyrdom, Emperor Julian the Apostle imprisoned Saint Basil in 363 AD when he began his Sassanid Campaign. Saint Basil prayed to Saint Merkourios and he appeared to Saint Basil telling him that he speared the Emperor through the chest with his sword.

2 There are two churches of Saint Merkourios where the dance is performed in the cemetery chapel. John explained that there used to exist the monastery of Saint John and the cemetery chapel of Saint Merkourios. On Sundays people of the upper village (pano horio) would attend the church of Saint John...
Between Young and old Greek orthodox Christians

One concern of the paper is the offerings that are given to the saint. In particular, there will be a focus on dance as a form of offering to the saint. Religious shrines maintain the religious experience of *latreia* that begins in the village where the connection to the saint begins as being either offered (*tamenos* or *tameni*) as a child. Alongside the and people from the lower village (*kato horia*) would attend the cemetery chapel of Saint Merkourios. The village population soon divided into two camps: those named upper villagers (*panohorites*) and those people referred to as the lower villagers (*katohorites*). It was decided to abandon the monastery of Saint John and to build a new church — the main church (*megali ekklisia*) of Saint Merkourios. The new church was built in the centre of the village so that the population would unite in one church for Sunday mass. John's grandfather was born in 1884 and when he was about fifteen years of age (c. 1899) a lady in the village had died and she did not have family to bequeath her wealth to. The land she owned was given to the village and the *meghali ekklisia* was built. VI remembered her father telling her that when the church was built, they made a large icon of Saint Merkourios and placed it in the new church. The older and smaller church remained the cemetery chapel as it had been before the construction of the *meghali ekklisia* but also used for Sunday mass by the *katohorites*.

When asking the respondents about the dancing, they all mentioned a dance called the *monahiko*. They explained that the *monahiko* is a lone dance having personal religious significance. The reason why the dance is called *monahiko* is because the dancer dances alone (*monahos*) with the saint and performs the dance as a *taximo* to encourage the saint to cure their ailing ear. The *monahiko* is not connected to one particular folk dance, and neither do all performers, men or women, perform it in the same way. What defines the dance generically is that it is a form of *taximo*. Its private nature is given meaning as worshippers performed within the confines of the cemetery chapel located on the outskirts of the village. KI specifically stressed that people locked themselves in the chapel because when she was the *kantilanaftissa*, she would have to unlock the chapel to let the dancers in and she remembered waiting outside while the worshippers danced. She also remembered that sometimes the dancers would not close the door and she would watch the dancing as she waited outside.
Panayia and pilgrimages in her honour, the saints are also holy exemplars strongly identified with protection, miracles and healing. The icon is an important point of religious reference when the worshipper invokes the spiritual assistance of a saint. It is at the saint’s icon where a promise (taximo) and an offering (tama) are brought forth to the saint. The taximo and the tama constitute religious expressions as used by worshippers. Dance is a less popular expression of taximo and it will be investigated here with a view to understanding how the dance known as the monahiko is performed when Istrians and their families experience an illness event. The paper also focuses on the role that Istrian mothers play when assisting their children in times of illness.

Methodology

I arrived in Istrios with gatekeeper John Iakras (58), a theologian and a retired high school teacher in 1998. John’s father had been the village priest of Istrios for the past 45 years including the years since my fieldwork in the village in 1998. Until his recent passing, John remained a church and community council member in Istrios. I was introduced to members of John’s extended family and given the keys to a vacated family home situated next to the old school in panohorio (upper village). This cottage had been the village coffeehouse during the Turkish occupation. I was first introduced to Katholiki Iakras (88) by her son John. The three of us had a dinner in her courtyard and John then left me there to begin my fieldwork. Katholiki introduced me to her husband’s sister, Vassilia Iakras (76), who had never married, and Vangelis Avgoustakis (84) their widower cousin. Vangelis then introduced me to his aunt Anna Avgoustaki (96) and his sister-in-law Theano Avgoustaki (82). After some time, John Iakras returned to the village and introduced me to Christina Pazzias (63) who was his godsister and was holidaying from Brisbane in Australia where she had migrated. Christina has two sisters living in the village, with their husbands: Theodora Vouki (63) and Arigio Vouki (66) (two Istrian sisters who married two Istrian brothers). I also interviewed Kostas Vouki (69), Arigio’s husband. Christina has been living in Brisbane for the past 45 years with her Istrian husband whom she married in Brisbane. She informed me that there were many Istrians now living in Brisbane of the 70+ age bracket and that she would be pleased to introduce them to me for the purposes of the research. When I returned to Australia, I travelled to Brisbane to conduct further interviews (14–26 March 1998), staying with Christina and going along with her to visit Istrian migrants with whom she remains in close contact. The Istrians now living in Brisbane migrated there after 1962. Christina introduced me to her godsisiter Anna Lazarou (71), her godson’s father Con Liscos (82), her childhood friend Vangelia Milona (63), her cousin Kostas Psardelis (75) and her aunt Hariklia Tsimbika (82). For the purposes of this study their names are henceforth initialised.
The word *monahikos* derives from *monahos* meaning “alone”. When the word *monahikos* is applied to dancing, various meanings are construed. Although the dancer physically dances alone, it is stressed that the dancer “spiritually” dances alone as the word *monahos* in this context explained by the respondents is understood as being “monastic”. The word *monahos* gives a spiritual significance to the dance because *monahos* also means “monk”. *Monahos* is then construed as “belonging to one” in the sense that a monk “belongs to God”. The dancers are understood by Istrians as “belonging to the saint” because they are either *tamenos* or *tameni* (offered to the saint) when dancing alone for him. When associating the word *monahikos* with the word “monahos” Istrians understand the dancer is “housed” while they perform. The meaning of the term “monahos” is significant in defining the private nature of the dance in the cemetery chapel. This is especially relevant to the respondents when some referred back to the life story of the saint who was locked in prison. The act of being housed inside the cemetery chapel and closing the door re-enacts the plight of the young Merkourios the soldier who was locked in jail and cured by the Archangel Michael of the wounds inflicted on him when he was tortured.

In the life of the saint, the mid-third century Roman Emperor Decius ordered soldiers to place Merkourios in a dark and moist room so that he would succumb to his wounds. It was there that the Saint prayed to God and the Archangel Michael...
appeared and cured him. This further explains why the respondents mentioned that people who had ear infections “locked” themselves in the small chapel and they danced the monahiko and prayed to the saint. The worshipper dances the monahiko alone in order to help heal himself or herself with the intervention of the saint. The dance is a performance not observable to the community but to the holy healer. The monahiko does not act to honour the church by unifying the community through group dancing at the paniyiri. It is a dance that acts to honour the saint by binding the individual to the saint in a private performance away from the paniyiri. There was no mention in the interviews that the respondents had a dream of Saint Merkourios who called them to the chapel to dance for him, a fact that indicates that trance and possession was no part of the dancing involved as a form of taximo for the saint.

The unique aspect of this worship is that Saint Merkourios is not portrayed as an icon but as a life-size wall painting. The impression one receives when standing in front of his image (see Image 2) is that the saint is leaping out of the wall toward the worshipper. Such an “active” portrayal of the saint is rather different to the smaller iconic representations of saints who are depicted as standing placidly facing the worshipper, hung on the wall of a church with distinct boundaries of the frame around the icon to suggest a celestial distance. The active, life-size warrior saint does not suggest this distance to the worshipper — he is depicted as though he is steering his horse through a door. He is not symbolically depicted as a “window” representation the way that icons are traditionally depicted. It is this unique representation that the worshipper reflects “action” back to the saint in the form of the dance promise and offering. The offering of barley to the saint’s horse before dancing seems to indicate that the worshipper wants to distract the saint’s horse to stop and eat while the saint’s attention is diverted and, looks on at the worshipper performing the dance for him (see Image 2). AL mentioned that the wall painting is housed in a tholos. AL’s father’s parents commissioned the wall painting when her father was still a young, unmarried man (c. 1910). By definition, a tholos is a circular
The wall painting does not typically represent the “window” representation of the icon but a “door” representation of a gate and two columns (see Image 2) which allude to this notion of “leaving and entering”.

When the worshippers visited the cemetery chapel, there were a number of ways they showed their reverence and devotion to the saint. VA remembered that dancers would offer tamata to the saint the day before his paniyiri. CP stated that if a worshipper danced for the saint while ill, they would make a taximo to go to his festival and open his kantili for having cured them. VA mentioned that some worshippers made a taximo to go to the chapel and do a skliva (circle) and to dance. VA was able to see this when he was about eight years of age (c. 1922). His parents told him that when someone made a taximo to the saint, they had to dance a skliva for him and that they would dance in the centre of the chapel where there is a slab of marble. He remembered that they danced around the marble but he was not sure why, although he is sure that it was a very old tradition. TV recalled that when she performed the dance, she would do sklives very quickly so that the sickness would drop from her body and, as soon as she finished, she walked straight out of the cemetery chapel. Her reason for doing this was because she had to exit as if she were dancing because she could not exit the way she entered — so that the sickness would leave with the turning of her body. VA remembered that before the war, when he was eighteen years of age (c. 1932), there was a lot of dancing at the cemetery chapel. He would follow people and watch them from the door and they would do a skliva. He remembered seeing women from the villages of Asklipio and Laerma but mostly from the village of Asklipio. They would do three sklives around the marble slab to honour the Ayia Triadha. KI recalled that when the women from Asklipio danced monahiko, they sang prayers. AV recalled that the song prayer took the following form:

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Άγιε Μερκουράκι μου
κάνε μου καλά το αφτάκι μου
και εγώ θα έρθω να χορέψω μπροστά σου
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my Saint Merkourios
make my ear well
and I will come and dance in front of you

CP also remembered that worshippers gave a taximo to dance a particular number of yirous (circles) after they were cured. Although a skliva and a yiro are both defined as circles, they are different movements occurring at the same time during the performance, which will be explained when comparing male and female dancing (see Figure 2). Performing a number of yirous only occurred if a worshipper had made it a taximo to perform again after being cured. Another type of tama was the offering of barley to the horse of the saint. KV remembered worshippers would place a handful of barley on a plate on the floor at the foot of the wall painting before dancing. This was done so that the saint’s horse could eat. KI remembers that barley was placed in front of the image of the saint and worshippers would go to the chapel the next morning and find that the barley had been eaten. When the horse ate the barley
it meant that the saint had “listened” and that the worshipper’s ears would “open up”. Many respondents mentioned that when their ear had healed they described a ringing sensation (koudhounizma) that would first occur after the dancing and after they had placed the holy oil from the saint's kantili with a piece of cotton into their ear. This usually occurred when they were at home. However, CP reported that her experience with the koudhounizma occurred while she was dancing at the cemetery chapel. All respondents explained that the koudhounizma was a very loud ringing in the ear — an almost piercing sound that shocked them. After this loud ringing sound they were healed.

Istrian mothers and religious dancing

An early relationship shared between mothers and children was the monahiko which mothers performed for their ailing children. AV recalled mothers would take their children directly to the saint and dance for them. They would first make their cross and pray to the saint. If the child was a baby or very young, another woman would pass it through the chapel's small window (thiraki) to its mother inside the chapel where she would change the child's clothing and leave the old clothes outside of the thiraki. The mother then held her child and danced in front of the saint. VA remembered that passing the child through the thiraki was considered an offering (tama). The thiraki has religious symbolism as it is considered a spiritual window. Children were brought out of the earthly environment (outside the chapel) and into the celestial (inside the chapel). This symbolic transference of earthly to celestial environments, when passing the child through the thiraki symbolises transference from illness to health. After the mother received her child, she would put oil on the child from the oil lamp (kantili) before dressing the child with new clothes and then making the child dance, holding it in front of the image of the saint. The new clothes were placed on the floor in front of the image of the wall painting before the mother dressed the child. AA recalled that the mother took some cotton wool and made the form of the cross on the head.
of the image of saint. She then dabbed the cotton wool with holy oil from the kantili. VA reported that in older village tradition people would not make the sign of a cross on the head of the saint but a swirl with the piece of cotton and then insert the cotton into the ailing ear.

Istrian worshippers also rubbed themselves with the oil from the kantili in the place where their body hurt. TA would also soak oil from the kantili onto a piece of cotton to place in her child’s ear. VM also reported that before dancing she would first bow (aspasi) to the saint and then dance one or two circles (yirous) and later throw barley to the saint’s horse. Women danced more often than men because of attempting to cure their children of illness. AA related a story of a nephew, who, in 1926, had a severe ear infection and pus would continuously pour from his ear for a two-year period. His mother was worried as the symptom seemed chronic and when he was five years of age, his mother bought a tama, an ear molded on a silver plaque and hung it in front of the image of the saint (see Image 3). The next day his ear was healed. The mother then went and danced with the child for the saint. As a taximo, the mother performed three circles (yirous) for the saint (see Figure 2). CP states that it was normally the mother who danced three yirous for the Holy Trinity (Ayia Triadha).

VA remembered something that happened to him as a child when he was eight years old (c. 1922). He was walking in the village and a bee came and sat in his ear without him realising. The bee had left eggs that developed into worms and his ear hurt. Near his house there was a woman who was known for plucking worms with a pair of tweezers and she plucked the worms and placed oil in his ear. She then crossed
herself and advised him to go to the cemetery chapel and do a circle (skliva) and clicks (tsakoumakia) so that the saint would help him to recover (see Figure 2). Most respondents reported that mothers would dance around the marble slab as well as in front of the saint. Not one respondent mentioned this about the men's dancing. Before the marble slab was placed there, it was also previously known to be a font for the baptism of children and later sealed. This gives religious significance to mothers and childcare, especially when considering that mothers both dress and undress their children during baptism. It is also interesting to note that when curing a child the mother takes the place of the priest in baptism. This is also clearly indicated when the mother anoints the child with holy oil.

The monahiko performed by women was different to the monahiko performed by men. The women's monahiko has been compared to the monahiki sousta which was performed only by men in the performance of sousta. Women at the paniyiri do not dance this form of monahiki sousta. The men's monahiko has been compared to a number of folk dances which are performed by men at the paniyiri. The women's monahiko included more sub-circles (sklives) and circles (yirous) which are circular movements in the dance, reflecting religious worship during the sacraments of the Greek Orthodox Church — in baptism when walking the baby around the font and also during the marriage crowning service when the Dance of Isaiah is performed (see Figure 2). Because it was reported by the respondents that the woman's monahiko included three yirous, this indicates a religious reverence, similar to walking around the font during baptism and during the marriage ceremony. This also occurs three times for the Holy Trinity (Ayia Triadha). Finally, because it was disclosed that women bowed to the saint before, during or after performing the monahiko, it indicates a reverence for the Ayia Triadha.

Male respondents mentioned that this indicates that men's dancing is linked to a secular understanding of the folk dances they danced at the paniyiri; specifically, it is associated with the dancing they performed for the saint in the cemetery chapel. They also mentioned that women's dancing in the cemetery chapel referred to the sacred, as the way they danced was only performed in the cemetery chapel and not at the paniyiri. Male respondents further stated that if the dancer was a woman, they would perform sklives and yirous during the performance, while men did not perform these during their performance. The male respondents remembered that men would dance like they did at any other celebratory occasion, often performing the karsilama. The extent of the dance tradition is not fully known but my gatekeeper John believes that the monahiko was also a tourkikos or servikos performance for the men.

CL also mentioned that the men performed as though they were dancing in the lead position for the sousta when the male broke from the circle to do a monahiki sousta and that the monahiki sousta resembled mballo. This is interesting as this was used to define the woman's performance which differed markedly from the men's performance. CL mentions that men performed sklives by using both their hands in the air, but that this was associated with the folk dances that men performed at the
paniyiria. The women, on the other hand, would use the right hand for performing the skliva, swooping toward the left side of their bodies and this guided the whole of their bodies to do a skliva to the left. The skliva was moving one’s body in a circle much like making a 360-degree turn. The yiro was the movement direction that was circular as opposed to moving the body in a straight line. Three sklives would be performed within the movement direction of a yiro, which was circular, and three sklives were completed within one yiro (see Figure 2). Four female respondents mentioned that when they were performing for their children, they completed three yirous. This, they explained, corresponded to the Holy Trinity (Ayia Triadha).

From the interviews it was established that women combined sklivae and a yiro in this manner. TV reported that while doing the skliva both men and women would do a click of the fingers (tsakoumaki or kounari). AV described how she would move her body left and right as she walked toward the wall painting and, at the same time, click her fingers, one hand up and one hand down, then reverse the hand positions, the other hand up and the other hand down. Women completed three sklivae for one yiro, very slowly around the marble slab in the chapel. KI recalled that they did a skliva, then a tsakoumaki, with the right hand that was guiding the body to complete a skliva. KI also recalled that women went around the marble slab three times, the way a worshipper would complete the cross three times and, would aspasi three times to the saint. My gatekeeper John reported that men’s monahiko was also different in that it was quicker: it involved jumping movements and doing tsakoumaki with both hands. This contrasted with the women’s monahiko which was slower and one in which they bowed during a skliva and also completed more yirous. KI reported something rather important from her own observations as the caretaker of the cemetery chapel for a nine-year period — she remembers that men did not frequent the chapel, only women who had taximo and they were called tamenes. They would dance once when they were ill and one other time as taximo when they were cured, but usually they danced when they were ill. KI also recalled that dancing for a second time after being cured almost always occurred on the eve of the saint’s festival. KI called these dancers paleomonahi. They would go and dance monahiko at the cemetery chapel and then they would return to the main church and dance the folk dances at the paniyiri.

Dancers from other villages

Worshippers who performed monahiko also came from other villages (see Figure 3). The respondents reported that these worshippers were women. KI remembered when she was twenty (c. 1930) women from the village of Asklipio would come to Istrios a day before the festival and these women were remembered by KI as very religious women and they brought olive oil from the village of Monolinthos for Saint Merkourios. Unlike Istrian men and women, they would hold hands and perform the monahiko as a group. This was the only account which I received concerning group dancing at the cemetery chapel.
Both VA and HT also remembered that these women went to the cemetery chapel and brought *krithari* for the saint’s horse. AA further reported that at the time she was twenty two (c. 1924) these women would bring *krithari* and they would all dance together at the cemetery chapel, which was something Istrian women did not do. VA, KI and HT reported that dancers were also known to come from Ayios Isidhoros while VA and KI also reported dancers from the village of Monolinthos and Laerma and VA and KV reported that dancers still come from Lardhos. Respondents mentioned that there are also smaller monasteries (*exoklisia*) for Saint Merkourios near the villages of Lardhos and Paradhissi. It is not certain whether dancing occurred near these other villages. However, respondents remembered that people from Laerma did not dance at the *exoklisi* of Lardhos because they came to Istrios to dance for the saint. There was also an *exoklisi* near the village of Masari but during the Second World War the Germans had bombed and destroyed it; later it was re-built. The monastery at Lardhos was damaged more than sixty years ago but my gatekeeper John mentions that the older dancers may have decided to come to the cemetery chapel in Istrios because it is closer than the village of Paradhissi.

Figure 3: Maps of Istrios and the *latreia* of Saint Merkourios on Rhodes
Conclusion

This paper has introduced the reader to a religious practice that gives a new definition of taximo and tama through the form of dance performed in front of a shrine in a cemetery chapel. Grain in the form of barley is also given with the dance performance, a practice which is not associated with other warrior saints. The taximo in the form of dance is linked to child cure as are other practices described by the respondents. However, the reason why the dance is practised by Istrians, in particular Istrian mothers, remains an enigma. No respondent was able to explain the origins of this dance practice. When did dancing the monahiko originate and what was it connected to? However, the way the mothers performed suggests the possibility that the monahiko may be connected to the Dance of Isaiah, which is performed during Holy Matrimony and the Holy Orders. Further analysis of the Dance of Isaiah performed during Holy Matrimony may connect a possible origin of the monahiko performed by Istrian mothers. The connection of the dance to Saint Merkourios could be through the Holy Trinity, since it is mentioned during the Marriage Crowning Service that the martyrs preached the Trinity with Saint Merkourios being an LX Martyr or the first 40 Martyrs achieving Sainthood. The crown is also a symbol of martyrdom and because death is typically associated with martyrdom, this may explain why the monahiko, performed as a taximo and a tama, took place in a cemetery chapel. Furthermore, during the marriage service a hymn begins by calling for the ritual of dance (khorodia) and the triple circular procession of the couple during the Marriage Crowning Service, which are seen as the proper and respectful form of liturgical dance. The liturgical dance also represents that a couple enter into the midst of the church and this new religious reality may have been how the monahiko originated — from the Dance of Isaiah. Further research is needed on the liturgical Dance of Isaiah in order to connect these rare practices of dancing as taximo and tama for the saint, to evaluate the ethnography of the Greek mother’s role as a liturgical dancer. This, in turn, may give further insights into defining her role alongside, but outside of, the duties of the cleric in the realm of the religious.