

BOOK REVIEW

Eva Palmer Sikelianos: A Life in Ruins. By ARTEMIS LEONTIS. Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press 2019. Pp. xviii + 340. Hardback, \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0-691-17172-2.

I have been looking forward to reading this book since I attended a talk by Artemis Leontis at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, under the title “The Alternative Archaeologies of Eva Palmer Sikelianos” (a videocast of which is now available at <https://www.ascsa.edu.gr/news/newsDetails/videocast-artemis-leontisthe-alternative-archaeologies-of-eva-palmer-sikeli>). Leontis has written an important book that ideally illustrates the extremely complex personality of Eva Palmer Sikelianos, the American heiress and wife of Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos, and as a result has readjusted the focus on several areas of the cultural landscape of Greece in the early decades of the 20th century, proving Palmer Sikelianos’ intimate association to and pivotal influence over them. At the same time, Leontis’ cultural biography of Palmer Sikelianos pointedly underlines the necessity of applying multidisciplinary approaches to the proper understanding of complex cultural concepts, such as the effort to comprehend and define Hellenism in the 20th century.

Until very recently, Palmer Sikelianos was an elusive figure, known even to professional students of Modern Greek literature and culture for little more than being the eccentric wife of Angelos Sikelianos, who moved about dressed in tunics which she weaved herself, learned and taught byzantine music and staunchly supported Sikelianos’ ideas and projects, including two grand Festivals that aspired to revive the “Delphic idea,” a modern embodiment of the Olympic spirit (“a vision of co-existence and reconciliation amongst nations, and the deliverance of mankind from the isolation of modern society, through poetry and the timeless values of the ancient Greek spirit,” according to the description of the European Cultural Center of Delphi) in the late 1920s. Leontis’ admirable research puts together in great detail the portrait of an intriguing personality: remarkably nonconformist, a life-long performer and devoted to the endless search for reviving and actually experiencing in her daily life the way of living of the ancient Greeks.

In the last quarter century three important works (two of them in Greek) were published on this intriguing personality and, in a way, have set the ground for Leontis' monograph. In 1993, John P. Anton edited and published Palmer Sikelianos' own *Upward Panic* (Hardwood Academic Publishers; the book had been published in Greek a year earlier by Exantas editions), a manuscript he erroneously subtitled "autobiography," which Leontis revisits (working with Palmer Sikelianos' manuscripts kept since 1965 at the Benaki Museum at Athens), showing that it actually operates as a theoretical manifesto for Palmer Sikelianos' life-long strife to uphold a way of life comparable to an actor's performance. This way of life consisted of a sustained effort to conceal her personhood and project instead "alternative modes of being in dialogue with unconventional sources" (182), including most notably her embracing activities and a way of daily life against modern times (such as spinning and weaving her own clothes, dressing in tunics and sandals, and trying through the study of byzantine music to recover the modes and rhythms of ancient Greek music). Then, in 1995 Lia Papadakis published in Greek a translation of the Letters sent by Palmer Sikelianos to Natalie Clifford Barney (*Grammata tēs Evas Palmer Sikelianou stē Natalie Clifford Barney*, Athens: Kastaniotis), an American heiress and socialite, but also poet, playwright and novelist, and the hostess in Paris of a literary salon at which people, for over 60 years, met weekly to socialize and discuss literature, art and music. This correspondence brought to light the intimate relationship between Barney and Palmer Sikelianos, a side of the latter's life largely kept in the shadows until that time. Finally, in 2008, Angelos Sikelianos specialist (and a poet in his own right) Kostas Bournazakis published, also in Greek, the 114 letters (and telegrams) sent to Palmer Sikelianos by her husband from the late twenties until the poet's death (*Angelos Sikelianos: Grammata stēn Evas Palmer Sikelianou*, Athens: Ikaros). All these studies are well-known to Leontis, whose impressive bibliography includes practically every publication that mentions Palmer Sikelianos.

Leontis' book unravels in five chapters, each covering a different phase in the life of Palmer Sikelianos, a fitting arrangement, for (incidentally) Palmer Sikelianos directed her energy on a different set of interests every decade. Thus, this seemingly chronologically determined, single and straightforward narrative line, traces the composition of five life-stories at once independent and yet intertwined—as if set to mirror the complexity of Palmer Sikelianos' many life-paths. The five chapters are preceded by an introduction that records the long (and fascinating) process of Leontis' research during the composition of the book and explains the rationale behind her approach.

Chapter 1 (“Sapphic performances”) discusses Palmer Sikelianos’ life prior to her marriage to Sikelianos and move to Greece. The epicenter of the chapter is Palmer Sikelianos’ fascination with the poetry of Sappho, specifically its fragmentary character, which inspired her to develop a certain way of thinking and acting—one marked by elusiveness, and as such, prone to endless reinterpretation underlined by fragmentation. It also stresses the importance of her search for reviving the ancient Greek life, and the best way for truly living it—a desire that became a lifelong quest. The core of this early phase in her quest for Greekness is her erotic relationship with Natalie Barney, her becoming a member of Barney’s Parisian circle, and her developing a strong interest in dramatic performance by aspiring to become an actress and a dancer herself.

Palmer Sikelianos’ meeting with the great dancer Isadora Duncan and her brother, who was married to Angelos Sikelianos’ sister, led her to Greece and inspired her new wardrobe. Chapter 2 (“Weaving”) describes Palmer Sikelianos’ course from wearing Greek-style tunics as part of a dramatic performance (of a Greek-in-spirit act), to adopting Greek-style dresses, which she learned to weave herself, and Greek posing as part of her daily ambience and a marker of her Greek self-fashioning. This regression to antiquity was part of her anachronistic approach to the recovery of the Greek part, as she believed that civilization did not die out but “came down” through successive reperformances or procedures undergoing continuing transformation through time. Weaving was such a procedure, as was song and dance. All three of these activities represent forms of soft and decaying arts, products that constantly evolve so as to undergo complete and irreversible transformation; yet, according to Palmer Sikelianos, the archetypal products of these arts may be recovered through reperformance as long as one manages to uncover the right steps that trace the course backwards. Thus, after she had mastered the art of weaving, which she considered an evolved but distinct expression of a similar ancient art (and mode of life), she turned to the revival of ancient Greek song and acting. Palmer Sikelianos’ delving into Byzantine music and the recreation of ancient performance, including her prominent role in the Delphic Festivals, are discussed respectively in Chapter 3 (“Patron of Byzantine Music”) and 4 (“Drama”). In Byzantine music and chanting, Palmer Sikelianos believed that she found the ancient roots of Greek and non-European song. She became a master of Byzantine music, which she taught at the Athens Conservatory, after she befriended the director of the Byzantine music school, Konstantinos Psachos, who largely shared her views about recovering ancient Greek music through Byzantine

notation and tunes. The latter invented a musical instrument, the *Panarmonio of Eva*, dedicated to Palmer Sikelianos, in order to perform Byzantine music in a more authentic manner, wrote music for revived ancient tragedies, including Palmer Sikelianos' staging of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* at the Delphic Festivals in ancient Greek, and proposed the harmonization of Byzantine music with the use of two or three resonant lines instead of only one. Chapters 2, 3 and 5 form a chronological sequence as they trace respectively Eva's activity in Greece through the early 1930s, when she alienated herself from her former collaborators and soul-mates, including Psachos and Angelos Sikelianos himself, and, impoverished by then after having funded generously with her own money the Delphic Festivals, returned to the USA. The fifth and last chapter, "Writing," recording Palmer Sikelianos' years of activity from the early 1930s to her return to Greece and death at Delphi twenty years later, comments on her prolific writing activity during that time, while naturally centering on her major accomplishment, *Upward Panic*, which transcribes her intriguing experiential quest towards recovering Hellenism. Leontis ingeniously employs the weaving metaphor to describe the many threads involved in the composition of *Upward Panic*, including Palmer Sikelianos' political awaking following the heroic victory of Greece over Italy in 1940, and including her translations of Angelos Sikelianos' resistance poems, *Akritika*, into English, along with her futile efforts to have it published—all the while stressing Palmer Sikelianos' reliance on the art of weaving for sustaining her life.

A brief epilogue ("Recollecting a Life") describes the odyssey of Palmer Sikelianos' meagre possessions following her death, until they found a permanent home at the Benaki Museum. Most importantly, however, it describes the careful construction of Palmer Sikelianos' post mortem image, by the post-war Greek cultural establishment, as a one-dimensional icon of classicism. Leontis' effort to move beyond this barrier generates important comments, particularly on the need for scholars of Modern Greek studies to acknowledge the complex, cultural and ideological exchange at work in the construction of modern Hellenism and to initiate scholarly dialogue that would honor and assess this multidimensionality properly.

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