



ANCIENT GREECE IN MODERN CALABRIA

BY KEVIN REVOLINSKI

Ah, Southern Italy! The scent of almond blossoms and lemon trees wafting through the air, the clanging bells of old churches ringing over red-tiled rooftops, and the gentle chatter of Greek on the streets and in the shops. Un momento! *Greek?*

MAGNA GRECIA

More than seven centuries before the birth of Christ, well before the first Roman set foot in southern Italy, the Greeks had built colonies along the shores of Calabria and Eastern Sicily that became *Magna Grecia* or Great Greece.

The area was home to such renowned historical figures as the poet, **Theocritus** and mathematician and inventor, **Archimedes**, and remained part of the Greek Empire until the Romans annexed it in the third century B.C.

One of two ancient coins commemorating an Olympic victory now in the Archaeological Museum of Reggio Calabria.

The Romans brought their own settlements, but remained respectful of the Greeks, allowing them to maintain their own language and culture. In fact, Greek was treated as a second language in Rome where there was a sizeable Greek minority well into the Christian era.

Franco Mosino, a professor in Reggio Calabria, has even argued that it was the Western Greeks who developed the Greek alphabet and wrote *The Odyssey*. “Many geographical names in the area are prominent figures in the tale,” he says. “The monster Scylla is now the town of Scilla, overlooking the Strait of Messina; and Aeolus, keeper of the winds, gave his name to the Aeolian Islands just north of Sicily.”

Some argue that ancient Greek has survived through the centuries up in Calabria’s isolated mountain villages where the pastoral life permitted the villagers to keep to themselves well into the twentieth century. Even today these



Mountain villages like Pentadattilo began as Greek colonies nearly 3,000 years ago.

[Photos by Kevin Revolinski]



Greek sign announces the village of Galliciano'.

The modern town of Scilla overlooks the Strait of Messina where Homer placed the monster, Scylla.



small mountain communities seem a world away from the coast though now there are at least drivable roads.

The Romans brought Latin to Calabria and along the coast many people picked it up, eventually turning it into what we now call Italian, but two hundred years before Rome fell, the Greek Byzantine Empire showed up in the sixth century A.D. Its people spoke the Neo-Hellenic language of Athens, a more recent form of Greek and gave the region its name, *Tema tis Calavrias* (now Calabria).

There is academic disagreement about whether the version of Greek spoken in Calabria is of Byzantine or Ancient Greek origin. Some words have survived from all the way back to the years of *Magna Grecia*, but the survival of the entire language is threatened in the region's isolated Greco-Calabrian villages like Galliciano.

“There used to be three elementary school teachers here and a doctor,” says

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Leo, a local resident. “Now there’s nothing. The only thing our young people want to learn is to drive.”

Calabrian Greek survives primarily through an oral tradition as the language of shepherds and villagers, though some written examples exist, usually in Latin script. The nineteenth century found folklorists transcribing local songs for posterity and more recently local writers have created original works that seek to preserve the language. A few local groups have occasional concerts, sometimes in exotic settings like the haunting abandoned Greek village of Roghudi deep in the Amendolea Valley.

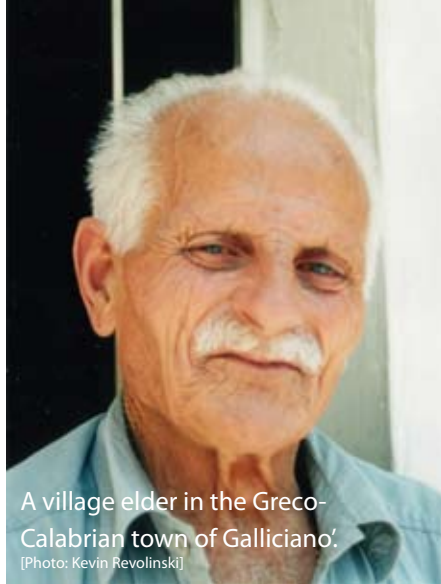


The “Megali Ellada,” 14 Greco-Calabrese singers, musicians and dancers, performed at the 2004 Olympics in Athens.

APODIAFAZZI

Carmelo Giuseppe Nucera is the president of an organization based in Reggio and Bova called *Apodiafàzzi*. The name means ‘the light before the dawn’ and its mission is to keep Greco-Calabrian culture alive. Until the Italian parliament changed a minority protection law in 1999, the Italian constitution hadn’t included Greek speakers in the regions of Calabria and Apulia. Each local community had to apply for inclusion to receive benefits. *Apodiafàzzi* promoted that legislation and keeps other preservation projects moving forward.

All legislation lays the groundwork for a process that must be taken up by the people themselves. One



A village elder in the Greco-Calabrian town of Galliciano.
[Photo: Kevin Revolinski]

article allows public broadcasting time for the language, another makes Greek optional in the elementary schools. Families will need to encourage their kids to learn, but even more importantly, teachers need to be trained and hired.

QUI SI PARLA GRECO

Estimates by *Apodiafàzzi* put the number of Greek speakers in Calabria at between 15,000 and 20,000. These populations are concentrated in villages such as Bova, Galliciano or Roccaforte del Greco. However, according to Dr. Nucera, many moved to the larger city for work years ago, so Reggio has the largest Greek-speaking population of them all.” In fact, offices exist in Reggio, Bova and Roghudi where information and even translators and interpreters are available.

Dr. Nucera’s goal is not to simply maintain an archaic tongue among the hills of Calabria. “We don’t want to teach a dead language. The children should learn Modern Greek. They should be able to go to Athens and speak and be understood.”

In fact, a dictionary of Calabrian Greek has rather modest contents. “It is better for them to learn a useful modern language and include the truly Calabrian words,” he says. *Apodiafàzzi* organizes occasional events and classes for this purpose. [For more

information, see www.apodiafazzi.it.]

“What most people don’t realize is that the Greeks here were renowned champions when the Olympics first began,” says Nucera. Two ancient coins held in the collection of the Archaeological Museum of Reggio Calabria commemorate an Olympic victory. Anassila di Reggio, the “tyrant” of Reggio in 480 B.C., was a champion racer. The coins feature a man in a light cart being pulled by mules.

The tradition is no longer a thing of the past: Greco-Calabresi musicians—some, in fact, from tiny Galliciano—performed at the 2004 Olympics in Athens. This group, known as *Megali Ellada*, tours Italy and abroad regularly and has recorded a CD of traditional Greco-Calabrian music. *Apodiafàzzi* itself is taking on an Olympian challenge to keep this culture alive. Victory has never been more important.

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A GRECO-CALABRESE SAMPLER

Some surnames of Greek Origins:

- Crea = ‘meat.’
- Romeo = ‘from Constantinople.’
- Chila = ‘man with fat lips.’
- Chardia = ‘heart.’
- Monorchio = ‘man with one testicle.’
- Falcomatà the surname of a former mayor of Reggio, = ‘coppersmith.’

Calabrian-Greek to Italian to English:

- Nerò = acqua = water
- Cali = Buono = Good
- Gerìa = Sacerdote = priest
- Sofi = sapiente = wise
- Caridi = noce = nut