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From the Ritual Year of the Modern Anastenaria to the Ancient Adōnia

The Anastenaria festival is celebrated 21-23 May in the village of Agia Elenē in Greek Macedonia. The festival is dedicated to the deceased saints, *Agios* (i.e. Saint) Kōnstantinos and Agia Elenē. Even if this is the most important festival during the ritual year of the Anastenaria, the ritual cycle of the Anastenaria is closely tied to the ecclesiastical calendar of the Orthodox Church, and begins on 26 October with the festival of Agios Dēmētrios and the traditional beginning of the agricultural year. The most important ritual during the Anastenaria festival, is the *Anastenarides*' (i.e. those who celebrate the Anastenaria) dancing barefoot over red-hot coals to ensure their own health, and secure the fertility of their land. During today's agricultural cycle, this healing festival is a festival of renewal celebrated before summer solstice and the grain harvest, and the ceremony ensures the passage from spring to summer with a purifying dance over the fire. Hence, the Anastenaria is also dedicated to the nature. The festival presents much symbolism related to fertility, such as the lamb sacrifice, *agiasma* ("holy water"), the consummation of the sacrificed lamb during a communal meal. The animal – a lamb or an ox - has to be black, male and not weaned from its mother until it is taken to be sacrificed.

The Anastenaria presents ecstatic dance by people who are possessed by their saint. These initiated persons are in a state of trance. The festival also presents a ritual, which in many ways is in opposition to the official Orthodox religion, and at times it has been persecuted by the Church. Therefore, it was performed in secret for many years last century, paralleling earlier circumstances. Officially, the uneasy situation between the Church and the Anastenarides has come to an end, and public performances are allowed. But, still the Church states that the festival presents a combination of paganism and Christianity, and does not subscribe to the holistic view of the Anastenarides. The Anastenaria also has neurological/psychiatric explanations, because the Anastenarides become purified through the dance while fighting their own problems. During the festival conflicts and problems within the group of Anastenarides also come to the surface, reflecting the problems of the individual, problems, which he – or she - tries to solve through the dance. The festival presents many antagonisms, between the state and the local society, rich and poor, men and women, those with and those without an education. Since the festival is celebrated by a circle mainly including the descendants of refugees, who arrived from the village of Kōsti in eastern Thrace in the 1920s, we also meet a ritual, which in many ways makes critical the relations between a group of "indigenous" people and the "immigrants", the latter constituting the wealthiest group.

A particular theme in the festival, which has been compared with ancient sources, is the "Dionysian" element and the "holy *dyade*" related to the cult of the Great Mother and the personified Bull god, via several couples, such as Kybele and Attis in Asia Minor, Demeter and Dionysos in the Greek area, and the modern cult dedicated to Agia Elenē and Agios Kōnstantinos. But, the similarities between the ancient cult dedicated to Aphrodite and Adonis and the modern cult may also be of relevance: Paralleling the relationship between official and popular religion in pre-Christian Greece, the Orthodox Church may be correct in maintaining that local preoccupation with various rituals and beliefs involves non-Christian elements. But it must be shown that such elements orient a significantly different cosmological structure or motivate a different "salvation idiom" for this to be evidence of a different religion. When participants in the Anastenaria say that Agia Elenē is the wife of Agios Kōnstantinos and not his mother, as historians, theologians, and the church contend, we must ask if this truly makes any difference to their faith. The answer is no.

Accordingly, the paper will present the modern ritual year of the Anastenaria, particularly the main festival. It will further make a comparison with an ancient parallel celebrated in connection with the same passage during the agricultural year, the unofficial Athenian festival dedicated to the

vegetation god, Adonis, the Adōnia, where the wedding aspect also was important. A reason to this is, as already indicated, that both festivals present ritual diversity within their respective societies, simultaneously as they belong to the same cosmologies within their respective communities.