

HISTORY OF MEDICINE ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΙΑΤΡΙΚΗΣ

Georgios Mylonogiannis (1866–1933) The life and work of a Cretan physician, freedom-fighter, and politician

Georgios Mylonogiannis (1866–1933) was a prominent figure of Crete, Greece. He was a physician, an important fighter of the freedom of the island, and a politician. Mylonogiannis studied medicine in Athens and subsequently returned to Crete to contribute to the revolution against the Ottomans. Following its liberation, he served in numerous political positions. Throughout his lifetime, he practiced medicine with selflessness and humanism, establishing himself as a shining example of medical ethos.

ARCHIVES OF HELLENIC MEDICINE 2024, 41(6):853–857
ΑΡΧΕΙΑ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΙΑΤΡΙΚΗΣ 2024, 41(6):853–857

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Γεώργιος Μυλωνογιάννης
(1866–1933): Η ζωή και το έργο
ενός Κρητός ιατρού, αγωνιστή
και πολιτικού

Περίληψη στο τέλος του άρθρου

Key words

Crete
Eleftherios Venizelos
First World War
Medicine
Public health

Submitted 17.12.2023

Accepted 30.12.2023

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of medicine extends beyond renowned physicians and innovators who advanced the field. It encompasses individuals who have practiced medicine in everyday life as well as during times of difficulty with self-sacrifice and humility. Historians of medicine bear the duty of immortalizing the lives of these lesser-known individuals, as their examples often hold more relevance for the average person striving for self-improvement. Moreover, the accomplishments of such physicians are at risk of fading into obscurity, as “people who have reached a genuine moral life not only do not like to speak about their achievements, but also view it as indecency, rudeness, or even treason to flaunt the hard battles that they had to fight in performing”.¹ Historians, thus, play a crucial role in ensuring that these lesser-known individuals secure their rightful place in the collective memory of the medical profession. One such inconspicuous figure among contemporary role models for physicians, who contributed not only to medicine but also to humanism, is Dr Georgios Mylonogiannis (1866–1933).

2. EARLY YEARS

Georgios Mylonogiannis was a multifarious personality, an important politician and a freedom-fighter, in addition to being a physician. Born in Kefalas, a village in Chania, Crete, he hailed from a family deeply rooted in the island’s history. His father, Mathios Mylonogiannis (1828–1901) was a prominent figure of the island, a renowned and respected leader who dedicated his life to the liberation and later served as a member of the Cretan Parliament. The elder Mylonogiannis married Afroditi Kouklaki in 1856. They became the parents of three boys and two girls; Georgios was born in 1866. At that time, Crete was under Ottoman occupation, and a widespread revolution of the Cretans against the Ottomans erupted. Although the Ottomans had initially granted some rights to Cretan Christians in 1858, they soon reneged on their promises. The failure of the Great Powers to agree on a peaceful solution to the problem fueled the uprising.² Given Georgios’s father’s active involvement in the revolution, the Mylonogiannis family faced peril, so in 1869 they moved to Athens. There,

the planning of the Cretan uprising continued, and Georgios was granted a scholarship by King George I (1845–1913) in honor of his father's efforts for Cretan independence.³ In September of 1883, he embarked on his academic journey, enrolling as a student at the Medical School of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.⁴

In those days, it was exceptionally rare and noteworthy for a Cretan to pursue a career in medicine. When Mylonogiannis completed his studies in 1889, the *Lefka Ori* newspaper in Chania stated “we happily announce that the son of our friend, leader, and member of the Parliament from Apokoronas (a municipality in Crete), Mathios Mylonogiannis, Georgios, has earned the prestigious title of “doctor” from the medical school (as graduates were called), achieving the enviable grade “very well””

Upon graduation, Georgios returned to Crete, which remained under Ottoman rule, and assumed the role of a provincial physician in the Apokoronas province. Provincial physicians were appointed by the county prefects wherever they were needed, receiving a fixed salary and facing dismissal for non-compliance with laws. The scarcity of scientifically trained physicians posed a serious challenge at that time, with much of the medical care on the island provided by charlatans or empirical practitioners. Additionally, Crete lacked a public hospital before 1866, and physicians primarily conducted house calls.⁵ In both his public service and private practice, Mylonogiannis demonstrated selflessness and profound respect for his patients' humanity. Notably, he generally declined payment from impoverished patients, instead providing them with the necessary funds to purchase medications, leaving the money discreetly under their pillows.

Yet, Mylonogiannis was driven by more than just his medical profession; he harbored a fervent desire to witness Crete liberated after nearly 450 years of occupation and suffering under Ottoman rule. His revolutionary endeavors led to his dismissal from the position of provincial physician in 1891, as per the Ottoman administration's claim that “he exhibited behavior incompatible with the duties of a civil servant.” Indeed, his public medical practice in Vamos (village of the area of Apokoronas) had become a gathering point for young Cretans involved in conspiracies to free their homeland from domination. In 1893, he took his commitment further by establishing a secret fraternity, later known as the Post-Government Committee. The primary objective of this organization was to support Crete in both diplomatic and military endeavors⁴ (fig. 1). Concurrently, Georgios opted to alter his surname from Mylonogiannakis to Mylonogiannis, shedding the -akis suffix that the



Figure 1. Georgios Mylonogiannis sitting, among Emmanouil Mountakis (left), and Markos Dimitrakakis (right).⁴

Ottomans had imposed on Cretans as a derogatory sign, translating to “small”.

3. FREEDOM FOR CRETE AND UNION WITH GREECE

Mylonogiannis played a pivotal role in the momentous revolutionary actions leading up to the great uprising of 1897. At the Cretans' military camp in Akrotiri, alongside his cousin Emmanouil Mountakis (1867–1953), also a physician, Mylonogiannis operated a makeshift hospital within a small church for the wounded. There, he applied his medical expertise and liaised with the Greek and foreign admirals to secure essential supplies, such as medicines and surgical tools. The priests of the church generously provided the hospital with vital provisions like food, milk, and oil for the wounded warriors. Most of them left the hospital not only healed but also reinvigorated for the ongoing struggle.⁶ Mylonogiannis also served as a member of the camp administration, alongside the future Prime Minister of Greece Eleftherios Venizelos (1864–1936).⁷ The Cretans,

fervently fighting for freedom and union with Greece, faced opposition from the Great Powers, apprehensive about a conflict between Turkey and Greece. Consequently, they compelled the Cretans to accept autonomous status for the island under the leadership of a High Commissioner.⁸ To manage affairs until the High Commissioner's arrival, an executive committee was established, comprising six members, including Mylonogiannis and Venizelos.

A dramatic incident during the revolution well characterizes the personality of Mylonogiannis. It is vividly described by his fellow soldier and lawyer Iosif Lekanidis (1863–1950), *"I will never forget the image of Georgios Mylonogiannis at the time of the Almyrida (village of the area of Apokoronas) battle (30.6.1896–4.7.1896). With a gun gripped firmly in one hand and bandages in the other, he disregarded the extreme heat, which became unbearable from the firing of the guns, the battle, and the peril of the enemy bullets, and rushed to aid the wounded as a physician, not omitting to fight with his gun when necessary."*⁴

It was no easy task for the young physician to heal his wounded comrades. Frequently, he found himself performing life-saving amputations using makeshift surgical tools salvaged from the battlefield.⁹ It is said that, once, in the mountains, he resorted to *tsikoudia*, a Cretan alcoholic beverage, for both anesthetizing his patient and disinfecting the improvised sword used for the operation. Allegedly, upon completing the procedure, he mused "I wish my Athenian professors were here to witness how surgery is done in Crete!"

In 1898, Prince George (1869–1957), the second son of King George I of Greece, arrived in Crete to serve as the High Commissioner. Over the subsequent years, Mylonogiannis held various political positions, serving as the Prefect of the regional units of Lasithi and Chania and as adviser of the Prince. Despite facing electoral setbacks in 1907, attributed to the opposition from Venizelos, he was finally elected member of the Cretan Parliament in 1910. The same year, he served on the three-man council governing Crete and later took on roles as the Minister of the Interior and Civil Protection and Minister of Justice.¹⁰ Finally, in 1913, he witnessed the union of the island with Greece, a monumental moment in Cretan history.

4. LATER LIFE

Mylonogiannis' diverse pursuits encompassed leading an elite Cretan army corps during the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), earning recognition with the Silver Cross and Golden Cross from King George I. Over the subsequent

decade, he was repeatedly elected to represent Chania in the Greek Parliament (31.5.1915 to 29.10.1915, 12.7.1917 to 10.9.1920, 1.11.1920 to 21.9.1922). During the ethnic division (1915–1917), he stood among the first to support Venizelos, organizing the dispatch of Cretan troops to Thessaloniki to fight in the First World War (1914–1918).¹⁰ His political career, however, came to an abrupt halt due to a severe illness following the death of his brother.³ Undeterred, he remained dedicated to his medical profession. He often rode his donkey through rain and snow to reach mountainous villages, where he provided care to the sick, provision to the wounded and assistance for the delivery of newborns. His practice of medicine was impeded by his patients' superstitions, as well as a lack of medical knowledge prevalent at the time. Notably, physicians in Crete of that time washed their hands only after performing surgical operations.

In reviewing his life for the newspaper *Crete* in 1912, Mylonogiannis wrote *"As a physician, during the whole three-year span of the revolution, I offered my services to everybody for free and at my own cost. Recalling my past, I tried in vain to find if I had ever collected any fundraising for the motherland that I didn't deposit or if I had ever been trusted with medication or other items for the wounded and kept it for my benefit. ... I only discovered one thing, that many times until today I have served in the highest positions of the government being poor and left them even poorer"*⁴

Another incident in Mylonogiannis' life, preserved by his descendants, serves as both a historical fact and as testament to his enduring selflessness. It is said that, in 1930, Venizelos, serving as the Greek Prime Minister at that time, and aware that Mylonogiannis had spent his inheritance for the good of the country, sent him a sum of money that his wealthy wife, Elena Skylitsi (1873–1959), had provided intending to aid aging and impoverished veterans. Mylonogiannis declined the gift, responding to the Prime Minister *"My dear Leftheris, why did you do that? You know what sort of person your friend Georgios is."* Venizelos then contacted Mylonogiannis' nephew, Nikolaos Spyridakis, and deposited the money into his account to use it to assist his uncle. Such was his pride and nobility⁹ (fig. 2).

Georgios Mylonogiannis passed away on December 27, 1933, in absolute poverty, despite having numerous opportunities to amass wealth. He died in his nephew's house in Vamos, Crete. Cretan newspapers mourned his death and praised his patriotic ideals, and he was buried with great honor in his village of Kefalas.⁷

Indeed, during the struggles of the Cretan people for freedom, physicians often emerged as leaders due to the



Figure 2. Eleftherios Venizelos sitting, Georgios Mylonogiannis in the middle above him.⁹

wisdom and prestige associated with their profession. Other eminent examples include Ioannis Sfakianakis (1848–1924), Vasileios Skoulas (1872–1944), and Emmanouil Mountakis (1867–1953), who served their country in the capacities they were most needed, as physicians, fighters, or politicians. The Cretan rebels, during times of difficulty for their island, set aside their personal affairs to collaboratively achieve the most valuable accomplishment: the freedom of their island and people.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Georgios Mylonogiannis, throughout his life, demonstrated to all who met him that he was a person of integrity, not through mere words but through unwavering actions. His commitment to this Platonic ethos, especially during turmoil, stands as a testament to his greatest achievement. His life prompts the contemplation of whether the story of such an exceptional individual holds reverence for the average person. A Modern Greek philosopher offers an answer: *“We will extol the virtues that we cannot practice ourselves, and we reserve the right to extol them as long as we genuinely strive, even if at a humbler level, to draw inspiration by the heroes and the martyrs who have successfully embodied them”*.¹¹

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Γεώργιος Μυλωνογιάννης (1866–1933): Η ζωή και το έργο ενός Κρητός ιατρού, αγωνιστή και πολιτικού

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Αρχεία Ελληνικής Ιατρικής 2024, 41(6):853–857

Ο Γεώργιος Μυλωνογιάννης (1866–1933) υπήρξε εξέχουσα προσωπικότητα της Κρήτης. Ήταν ιατρός, σημαντικός αγωνιστής της ελευθερίας του νησιού και πολιτικός. Ο Μυλωνογιάννης σπούδασε Ιατρική στην Αθήνα και κατόπιν επέστρεψε στην Κρήτη για να συνεισφέρει στην επανάσταση κατά των Οθωμανών. Μετά την απελευθέρωσή της υπηρέτησε σε πολυάριθμες πολιτικές θέσεις. Καθ' όλη τη διάρκεια της ζωής του άσκησε την Ιατρική με ανιδιοτέλεια και ανθρωπισμό, αναδεικνύοντας τον εαυτό του ως φωτεινό παράδειγμα ιατρικού ήθους.

Λέξεις ευρητηρίου: Δημόσια υγεία, Ελευθέριος Βενιζέλος, Ιατρική, Κρήτη, Πρώτος Παγκόσμιος Πόλεμος

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