

# When Displacement Ends: Reversing Displacement through Myth and Ritual on the Island of Imbros

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## Summary statement

This paper, excerpted from my on-going PhD thesis, analyses the role of myth and ritual in the post-displacement era of the island of Imbros, and questions whether Imbros' myths and rituals can act as counter-displacement practices.

## Topic

This paper investigates the *Panagia* rituals and local myths on the island of Imbros, where the anti-minority policies of the Republic of Turkey caused the displacement of the island's Greek community between the 1960s and 1980s.

## Scope

My PhD study suggests a re-thinking of displacements as a series of spatial, political and historical practices operating through complex relational processes. The concept of displacement is, therefore, a multi-layered phenomenon having different actors and affecting people differently according to their socio-cultural and economic affiliations.

More specifically, my PhD study investigates the practices of displacements in the island of Imbros, whose Greek community, regarded as a 'minority' in the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey as well, was forced to leave the island, although having been under the protection of the international laws and agreements. Furthermore, as histories of architecture in the context of Turkey are also a matter of the nation-state's exclusions of minorities, in a broader sense my PhD also addresses the spatial, temporal and political implications of the disappearance of 'minorities' under the sovereignty of the Republic of Turkey from the beginning of the twentieth century.

This paper, excerpted from my on-going PhD thesis, is developed around the notion that myth and ritual have the power to create material and immaterial spaces, and through these spaces memories of displacement, longing and the idea of the homeland can be experienced and performed by the Imbrian community. The aim is to analyse the rituals and the spaces of the rituals accompanied by the local myths. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, rituals and myths have been the driving force to maintain the community bonds and preserve the cultural and architectural heritage intact in Imbros. The oral and written myths and the histories of Imbros, indeed, have often played a part in the re-emergence of the rituals on the island by supporting each other. The *Panagia* rituals, the main subject of interest of this paper, are significantly shaped by the exile-return and the homeland themes, and take place at churches, graveyards, public squares, mountain chapels and some peculiar landmarks.

## Case Study

My PhD research follows a site-specific approach pursuing an understanding of site as a relational and mobile place beyond an indication of its physical location, as explained in the concept of 'relational specificity' by Homi Bhabha. In this sense, the main, but not only, site for the case study is the island of Imbros.

Imbros is an island of the Aegean Archipelago. It is located closer to the northeastern edge of the Aegean Sea. The area is also known as the Thracian Sporades together with the islands of Tenedos, Thassos, Lemnos and Samothrace.

The island of Imbros has been under the control of the Republic of Turkey since 1923. Over the twentieth century, its occupancy has been drastically changed as well as its names. Imbros used to be overwhelmingly inhabited by a *Rum* community (Asia Minor Greeks) who are acknowledged to be Christian Orthodox, speaking Greek, and, in the case of Imbros, generally working in the area of agriculture. *Rum* is a generic term used for the ethnocultural community/minority who declared their belonging to Ecumenical Patriarchate, often speak Greek and have Orthodox Christian religion. The word is believed to derive from the Greek word Ρωμιοί, meaning Roman, and refers to East Roman Empire/Byzantine Empire. Many historians claim that by considering the Byzantine Empire as their ancestors, the Greek community of Ottoman Empire uses the word *Rum* to describe themselves and their community.

Although the *Rum* populations of Imbros, Tenedos and Istanbul were exempt from the compulsory exchange of minority populations in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which entailed a condition of autonomy for Imbros and Tenedos, the majority of the *Rum* population had to leave Imbros between the 1960s and the 1980s due to the displacement practices of the Turkish governments.

After the displacements, the historic villages slowly went to rack and ruin or even became targets of vandalism. The Imbrian community started to create their diaspora in Greece as early as the 1940s. Following that, two Imbros Unions in Athens and Thessaloniki aiming to bring the diaspora people together and sustain the bonds were founded. By the 1990s, the weight of the pressure on Imbrians significantly diminished in the island. By 1991 the island was no longer a military zone, but instead, it was declared a Heritage Protection Area. By the 2000s for the Imbrian diaspora, the obligation aroused to visit the island and support the elders who have been still living in Imbros. Indeed, the diaspora decided to revive the old rituals and traditions as a way of re-claiming belonging to the island. It was apparently an ambitious decision at the time, which required constant effort and economic support. With the revival of the Panagia (Virgin Mary) festival, which takes place in every August, the island started hosting a series of events which are not only related to the Orthodox Christian religion but also to the island's long (hi-)story of displacements.

### **Intended Conclusions**

The broader aim of my PhD study is to conceptualise a discourse of displacement drawing on Imbros, which has been neglected and often omitted from the historiography of Turkish and Greek minority studies, and ultimately to discuss and situate Imbros in broader discourses of displacement and also minority studies. Thus, this paper forming part of this PhD study aims at contributing a comprehensive understanding of displacement by investigating Imbros' rituals and myths as potential counter-displacement practices.

### **References**

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**Figure 1: 1954 Parade of Imbros (The archives of Imbros and Tenedos Studies Association Thessaloniki)**



**Figure 2: Panagia rituals (2000s, The archives of Imbros and Tenedos Studies Association, Thessaloniki)**



**Figure 3: Panagia Rituals in the church (2017, photo by Sevcan Ercan)**



**Figure 4: Panagia Rituals in the church (2017, photo by Sevcan Ercan)**