

Rupert Brooke: A landmark in Skyros' history

by Anna Faltaits

One hundred years ago, on April 23rd 1915, a young British soldier died and was buried on the remote island of Skyros. The Skyrians didn't know who the unfortunate man was –in all likelihood they couldn't even read his name which was written in English on his grave's simple wooden cross. Even so, they mourned him as if he were their own child. They lit a candle and burned incense to the unknown soldier's memory and there would always be someone who would leave a few flowers on his grave, even though it was so far from the island's main town.

Little did they know that, only a few years later, this young man, would become a focal point for the development of Skyros, breathing new life into a very ancient, but practically abandoned as time went by, part of Greece's civilization.

Rupert Brooke had already published collections of his poems before he died, however it took quite a few years before his poetic grandeur was recognized and he be placed among the pantheon of the Great War Poets.

This was thanks to the laborious and tireless efforts of a Belgian philanthropist and poet, Professor Paul Vanderborght, who in 1920 started his efforts to create an International Committee for the poet Rupert Brook, that would undertake –among other actions- the erection of a monument in honor of the prematurely deceased poet. In his efforts, he was aided not only by eminent men –and women- of intellect from abroad, but also by many enlightened Greeks, including the then president of the community of Skyros Sophocles Stefanidis, Greek sculptor Michael Tombros (who created the monument), painters Dimitris Stephanopoulos and Harikleia Alexandridou-Stefanopoulou, and the president of the Association of Skyros in Athens, journalist Costas Faltaits.

The International Committee for the Rupert Brooke memorial statue began to take shape in 1925. The 40 member committee consisted of Greeks, British, Egyptians and Belgians, among them Constantine Cavafy, Linos Politis, sir Robert Allason Furness, Khalil Mutran, Ahmed Shawqi, Henry Nash and Paul Vanderborght. Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos, the high Commissioner of England in Egypt Lord Lloyd, and the British ambassador in Athens Sir Percy Laurin became honorary presidents , under the high protection of the Ambassador of

Greece in Cairo Panagiotis Metaxas and the Greek ambassador in London Mr. Kaklamanis.

Greek painters Stefanopoulos and Alexandridou, along with the sculptor Michail Tombros were designated as the Committee's delegation to Skyros, who would visit the island in order to study the area.

The Committee's target was to funnel 400.000 drachmas from Europe and Egypt for the monument. In today's money that would be about 270.000 euros –a huge sum of money at the time.

Four years later, through an open letter which Mr. Vanderborght published in the Greek newspaper "Elefthero Vima" on June 5, 1929, Skyros was notified about the Committee's intention to erect a monument on the island, in honor of Brooke and Eternal Poetry.

"In picturesque Skyros, away from the noise of the world, we will erect in April next year (1930) a monument, which will be the work of a Greek sculpture. Never for a moment did we think of disturbing the simple and quiet place where the poet's grave lies (...). Among the living, amidst the humble residents of the small island of Skyros with its white houses, the monument will have its best place. It will consist of a large bronze statue which will bring to memory the death of Rupert Brooke and the glory of all the poets who fell too soon, in the prime of their youth (...)", Mr. Vanderborght wrote.

As he explained, it had been decided that the statue's pedestal would be "carved on skyrian marble, and under an embossed medal portraying the poet's handsome profile will bear a double dedication: "To the British poet Rupert Brooke – To Immortal Poetry".

Mr. Vanderborght was aiming for the monument to be revealed in May 1930, however, as this was not possible, the ceremony finally took place a year later.

Correspondence between Vanderborght, the president of the community of Skyros Mr. Sophocles Stefanidis and the president of the Association of Skyrians in Athens, Mr. Costas Faltaits, regarding the organization of the erection of the monument and the accompanying celebrations, lasted for two years. Mr. Vanderborght also made a point of informing the Skyrian authorities that there were pressures for the monument to be erected in Athens instead.

In a letter to the Community of Skyros, dated October 26, 1929, he wrote: “I do not hide, gentlemen, that certain persons, of Greek nationality, had suggested we erect the monument at a square or public garden in Athens, as was the case with the statue of Byron. I confess that the difficulty would be less and that in that case we would officially hand the monument over to the City of Athens, as is usually done, without having to bear the expenses of expropriation, which we hadn’t anticipated”.

Apparently, this... confession gave the Skyrians the necessary motivation to immediately undertake all the necessary actions for the project. They assured the Committee that Skyros would do everything possible so that it would live up to its reputation.

Indeed, the celebrations that would take place on the island for the revealing of the monument, would have an international character. More than 300 people not only from Greece, but also from many foreign countries, such as the United Kingdom, Belgium and Egypt, would visit the island.

So, the Community of Skyros, its inhabitants, and the Association of Skyrians in Athens, made superhuman efforts in order for the island to present an as much organized and decent image as possible.

Of course, for the celebrations to take place, large sums of money that the Community of Skyros did not have, were needed. This is where the Association of Skyros in Athens stepped in and, through its president’s efforts, managed to gather 45.000 drachmas from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Tourism, the Foreign Service and the National Steamship Company, which were a great help. But this money was only a fraction of the expenses needed for tidying up the town of Skyros, adorning it, for transporting 350 people, for the reception meal, etc.

Meanwhile, as the International Committee had not predicted the exact expense for the construction of the bronze statue of Rupert Brooke, financial difficulties encountered, and they were not able to buy with its own money the land that was needed to build the square on which the monument would be placed. And so, the Community of Skyros offered to buy –and finally bought- the necessary land, for which it paid 40.000 drachmas.

The total expenses for the celebrations and the construction of the square for Brooke’s monument –which cost 80.000 drachmas- amounted to

150.000 drachmas. Taking into account other expenses, such as the purchase of the necessary pieces of land and the works needed in order to pave the roads in the town of Skyros, a total of 200.000 drachmas was spent for the celebrations that were to take place for the unveiling of Rupert Brooke's monument.

Considering that Greece's economy was already depressed and one year later, in 1932, the country declared bankruptcy, this was a large sum of money.

From the moment the International Committee communicated its intention of erecting the monument on Skyros, the island's Community, recognizing what an honor this would be for the island, raced against time in order to give Skyros a much needed "facelift".

The importance attributed to the celebrations on Skyros, not only from Greece, but also internationally, was great. One hundred and twenty scholars, journalists, artists, intellectuals, men of fame and wealth from abroad would visit the island in order to attend the unveiling of the monument. Double that number would be the Greeks attending. And a week later, two hundred French intellectuals would arrive on Skyros, to commemorate the British poet.

But although the island was naturally beautiful, however its infrastructure was practically non-existent, barely covering the needs of the Skyrians themselves, much less, the needs of such a large number of foreign visitors from all over the world!

In merely one year, the president of the Community of Skyros, Mr. Stefanidis, managed to bring electricity and running water to the town of Skyros –which it did not have up until then. The town acquired a lovely square –the one we still enjoy today- and also a wide road leading from the Elementary School to the town's agora.

Public bathrooms were build in various parts of the town, in order to serve "cleanliness and decency", and there was a general cleanup of all the decaying and damaged buildings and structures of the town.

In addition, the Community build a large network of cobbled roads, so that only a small part of the town was left without paved roads.

The port committee build docks in the areas of Acherounes , Basalaki and Linaria –which had not yet become the island’s port- while electricity was brought to the area of Linaria.

The road connecting Linaria with the town of Skyros was finally constructed –actually the construction works finished only a few days before the celebrations and the road was used for the transportation by car of the officials from Linaria to the town of Skyros.

Another noteworthy development, on the occasion of the erection of Rupert Brooke’s monument on Skyros, was the establishment by the Association of Skyrians in Athens, in 1930 of what was perhaps the first local folk and archeological museum in Greece, whose purpose was to present and preserve the island’s history. The museum, which was only made possible with the valuable help and contributions of the inhabitants of Skyros, opened in March 1930 and was housed where the Town Hall stands today.

The unveiling of the monument of Rupert Brook and Immortal Poetry took place on April 5, 1931, in all its splendor, causing the admiration of all visitors. After a simple and unadorned ceremony at the poet’s grave in Tris Boukes –where we visited earlier today-, officials were transported by car, donkey or mule to the town of Skyros, where a grand reception was held.

And what a feast that must have been! The menu alone consisted of 40 lambs and about 72 kilos of lobster (Skyros was famous even back then for its lobsters!) and tens of kilos of other local products, of which nothing was left.

The guests then walked to the Brook square, where Greece’s prime minister Eleftherios Venizelos unveiled the monument and a number of distinctive personalities –among which Greek writers Angelos Sikelianos, Mirtiotissa and Spiros Panagiotopoulos- spoke and read poems dedicated to Rupert Brooke.

Eighty four years have passed since that day, and the statue of Rupert Brooke remains a point of reference for the island of Skyros. To the world, Rupert Brooke is a Great War Poet and a symbol of immortal poetry. For Skyros, he is much more: he is the spark that re-ignited the flame of the Skyrian culture.