



Summary :

The Melas family came from Epirus and was one of the most important families of the region. Members of the family occupied themselves with European trade on the 18th and 19th century. They became relatives with other important families, such as the Vasileiou and the Mavros family, with which they collaborated in trade. A relative of the family was the known scholar Dimitrios Vikelas.

Date and Place of Birth

Old family from Epirus with an activity in the field of trade documented from the middle of the 18th century.

Main Role

Merchants

1. Introduction

The Melas family came from Ioannina and is amongst the most important, “the oldest noble families of Epirus”.¹ Amongst them also the Maroutis, Makris, Drosos, Krommydas, Karagiannis and Sougdouris families are mentioned. According to some, the Melas family had Byzantine origins, since, as mentioned by the family’s basic biographer, Leon I. Melas,² they came from the family of Stratigopoulos, who was a Byzantine official.

Members of the Melas family were scattered in many places of central Europe, already from the 15th century. We find them at the court of king Sigismund of Hungary-Bohemia in the 15th century, and more specifically with the name Melas Feld in Bohemia. Furthermore, the Melas presence is mentioned apart from Epirus also in Illyria, Dalmatia, Walachia. It is indicative that the Magyar Ioannis Freiderikos Melas was a member of the court of the Habsburg emperor Charles VI in 1712. One of his descendants was Michael Friedrich Benedict Melas, commander of the Austrian forces against Napoleon in the famous battle of Marengo which took place on 14th June 1800.³

The Epirotan branch of the Melas family apparently appears with this name in the beginning of the 18th century and the initial geographical nucleus of the family was Palia Pogdoriani, where the existence of the ruins of the towers of the Melas is reported.⁴ In the seventeenth century, after the rebellion of the bishop of Arta Dionysios "Skylosofos" and the changes its suppression brought in the region of Epirus, the Melas family apparently lost a substantial part of its land estate.⁵

2. The merchant activity of the Melas family

2.1. The 18th century

In the middle of the 18th century we find the Melas family settled in [Constantinople](#) and Russia being occupied with fur trade. The Melas family, along with other merchants of Epirus, Thessaly and Macedonia, are part of these Orthodox Balkan merchants (the central figure being the Greek or Grecized merchant), who, after the middle of the 18th century mainly, penetrated in the heart of central and eastern Europe as well as of Russia and almost exclusively undertook the trade of these countries with the Ottoman Empire.⁶ It is not accidental, therefore, that the Melas family had the centres of their business at Nižná, fur-trade centre, and Moscow, expanding however in [Odessa](#), Sankt Petersburg and of course Constantinople.⁷ The organization of this network was a typical characteristic of a merchant network of the era, based on the trust between the collaborators of different centres, which derived from bonds of relationship or common origin.⁸

2.2. The Melas merchant network



The Melas merchant network was constructed by the brothers Panos (Ioannina 1730-Russia 1816), Anastasios (Ioannina 1733-Constantinople 1801) and Leon (Ioannina 1738-Constantinople 1811), Dimitrios' sons. The older brother Panos died without having married. Anastasios had two sons, Dimitrios (Ioannina 1770-1842) and Petros (Ioannina 1792-[Brăila](#) 1855), whereas Leon, better known as Leontaris, had 5 sons and one daughter: Dimitrios (Ioannina 1772-1850), Theodosios or Theodoros⁹ (1775-?), Georgios (Ioannina 1785-Constantinople 1856), Ioannis (Ioannina 1787-Salamina 14/5/1833), Pavlos (1790-Mesolongi 1826, during the city's siege) and Angeliki, for we only know she was married to Ioannis A. Panos.

All the descendants followed the same typical course: after acquiring the elementary for the time education in Ioannina, they would then move to Constantinople, where the first important branch of the Melas family was located, probably also to have a first contact with the merchant matters, and later left for Russia, to complete their apprenticeship as traders and to support the local business of their branch or to undertake the foundation of a new one. A characteristic example are the sons of Leontaris: Dimitrios took over the Moscow branch, after working with his uncle Panos, Theodoros or Theodosios took over the Odessa branch, Ioannis and Pavlos the Leipzig branch, whereas Georgios the Constantinople branch.¹⁰ However, it should be noted that this system was not rigid, since after some time Dimitrios would more and more come to the Odessa branch, which acquired the name "Theodosios L. Melas and Brothers".

2.3. The merchant activity of the descendants of Georgios L. Melas

The continuation of the successful occupation with trade for the Melas house became possible thanks to the descendants of Georgios L. Melas. In a great degree the case of Petros Melas' son, Anastasios (1822-1890) is differentiated: he initially made a successful career in trade, starting from Constantinople with the support of his uncle Georgios Stavrou. Then he settled in Russia until 1850. He ended up in Brăila and, having acquired Russian citizenship, became the consul of Russia. Although he occupied himself with trade, he was in the same time one of the most important members of the Greek community of the city.¹¹

The marriage of Georgios L. Melas with the daughter of the great merchant Michail Vasileiou from Argyrokastro, Smaragda,¹² was a strategic success, because on the one hand the house of Vasileiou was considered to be one of the most important in Constantinople, and on the other it was related to the powerful merchant of Odessa [Spyridon Mavros](#), husband of the other daughter of Michail Vasileiou, Euphrosyni. However, his involvement with the [Filiki Etaireia](#) (Society of Friends) and the retaliation of the Ottomans in Constantinople during the Greek War of Independence led him to many travels (Odessa-Ancona-Fiume-Hydra-[Syros](#)-Athens) until his final return to Constantinople and the re-establishment of his house in 1835.¹³ During his passage from the newly founded Greek state (1828-1835) he took various offices, such as the presidency of the Merchant Court of Ermoupolis in 1831. Georgios L. Melas had three sons and two daughters: Leon (Constantinople, 30/11/1812 - Athens, 27/10/1879), Konstantinos (Constantinople, 1814 - Marseilles, 1905), Vasileios (Constantinople, 1818 - Paris, 1884), Michail (Syros, 2/4/1833 - Athens, 17/6/1897), Euphrosyni, who married [Andreas Vallianos](#), and Smaragda, who married Emmanouil Vikelas, father of Dimitrios Vikelas.

The return to Constantinople and the re-establishment of his house led to its expansion and to the creation of several branches. Initially, in 1849 the house of the Melas Brothers was founded in London, which became a branch of the house of Mavros from Odessa. The house of London was directed by Georgios' sons, Vasileios and Leon, who later (1854) became independent from the house of Mavros and rendered the house of London a central branch of the Melas house with sub-branches in Marseilles in 1857, directed by their brother Konstantinos (along with Leon who left London), and at [Galati](#) of Rumania, directed by his younger brother Michail.¹⁴ Their enterprise was however considered to be a medium-sized one, which could not be compared with the great houses of the Greeks of London, like [Rallis](#), [Rodokanakis](#), [Zarifis](#), Vallianos etc.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it seems that the Marseilles branch had a remarkable presence in the field of imports from the harbours of the Black Sea, since in 1860 it kept the fourth position after the houses of Spartalis, Rallis-Skylitsis-Argentis and Rodokanakis, with 29 ships which transported for them 6,156 tons of cargo.¹⁶ The London house was finally dissolved in 1876 by its partners, uncle and nephew, Vasileios Melas and Dimitrios Vikelas (already in partnership since 1857).¹⁷

For the Melas branch in Odessa we do not know much, apart from the fact that it was directed by Theodosios, for whom we have no



further information, along with Dimitrios, Georgios' brother. Dimitrios L. Melas, who apparently was at the top of the family and company pyramid, being also the older brother, decided in 1848 to reorganize the structure of the Melas house along with his cousin Ioannis S. Melas, asking also for the mediation of Georgios in the new branch of [Taganrog](#), a decision with which apparently Georgios was unwilling to cope with. However, from another source we learn that Geogrios Melas, along with his daughter Smaragda and Emmanouil Vikelas' family, left in 1839 and directed S. Mavros' branch at Taganrog, whereas his daughter's family settled in Constantinople.¹⁸

3. Other activities of the Melas family

The members of the Melas family, however, did not limit their activities only in trade, but distinguished themselves in many other fields, such as literature, politics, administration, law and army. Leon G. Melas, apart from being the author of *Gerostathis* and *Christoforos*, was distinguished in a series of offices he assumed in Athens. As a young man already he became a minister of justice in 1841 in the government of Alexandros Mavrokordatos. He was a representative of the Epirotans in the institutional assembly of 1843, whereas, after his final return from Marseilles in 1859 and his withdrawal from the world of business, he once again occupied himself with politics and became the representative of the Greeks in Manchester in 1862.¹⁹ Konstantinos also wrote a very successful merchant manual, whereas Dimitrios Vikelas –Melas from the side of his mother Smaragda- occupied himself with literature, with *Loukis Laras* being his most famous novel, whereas he also had an important contribution to the revival of the Olympic Games. Michail G. Melas, who studied law in Paris, became a senator of Attica in 1890 and the mayor of Athens in 1891. Michail's son was the well-known fighter of the Macedonian Struggle Pavlos Melas (born in Marseilles in 29/3/1870), an officer of the Greek army who was killed in a battle with the Ottoman troops in Siatista in 1904.²⁰

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1. Μελάς, Λ.Ι., *Ηπειρωτικές μελέτες. Μία οικογένεια, μία ιστορία* (Athens 1967), p. 35.
 2. Μελάς, Λ.Ι., *Ηπειρωτικές μελέτες. Μία οικογένεια, μία ιστορία* (Athens 1967), pp. 36-37.
 3. Μελάς, Λ.Ι., *Ηπειρωτικές μελέτες. Μία οικογένεια, μία ιστορία* (Athens 1967), pp. 36-37.
 4. Μελάς, Λ.Ι., *Ηπειρωτικές μελέτες. Μία οικογένεια, μία ιστορία* (Athens 1967), p. 38.
 5. Μελάς, Λ.Ι., *Ηπειρωτικές μελέτες. Μία οικογένεια, μία ιστορία* (Athens 1967), p. 45.
 6. Stoianovich, T., "The Conquering Balkan Orthodox Merchant", *The Journal of Economic History* 20/2 (1960), p. 234.
 7. Μελάς, Λ.Ι., *Ηπειρωτικές μελέτες. Μία οικογένεια, μία ιστορία* (Athens 1967), p. 91.
 8. For the definition, structure and function of a merchant network see Χαρλαύτη, Τ., *Ιστορία της ελληνό κτητης ναυτιλίας, 19ος-20ός αιώνας* (Athens 2001), pp. 129-151.
 9. Mihail-Dimitri Sturdza, *Dictionnaire historique et généalogique des grandes familles de Grèce, d'Albanie et de Constantinople* (Paris 1983), p. 342, mentions him as Theodoros, whereas the biographer and the descendant of the family Leon I. Melas, (Μελάς Λ. Ι., *Ηπειρωτικές μελέτες. Μία οικογένεια, μία ιστορία* (Athens 1967), p. 200, as Theodosios.
 10. Sturdza, M.-D., *Dictionnaire historique et généalogique des grandes familles de Grèce, d'Albanie et de Constantinople* (Paris 1983), p. 342.
 11. Μελάς, Λ.Ι., *Ηπειρωτικές μελέτες. Μία οικογένεια, μία ιστορία* (Athens 1967), pp. 122-124.
 12. Eleni, according to Melas, see Μελάς, Λ.Ι., *Ηπειρωτικές μελέτες. Μία οικογένεια, μία ιστορία* (Athens 1967), p. 201.



13. Καρδάσης, Β., *Έλληνες ομογενείς στη Νότια Ρωσία, 1775-1861* (Athens 1998), p. 221; Μελάς, Λ.Ι., *Ηπειρωτικές μελέτες. Μία οικογένεια, μία ιστορία* (Athens 1967), p. 220.
14. Καρδάσης, Β., *Έλληνες ομογενείς στη Νότια Ρωσία, 1775-1861* (Athens 1998), p. 222; Χαρλαύτη, Τ., *Ιστορία της ελληνόκτητης ναυτιλίας, 19ος-20ός αιώνας* (Athens 2001), p. 149; Βικέλας, Δ., *Λουκή και Λάρας* (Athens 2000), introduction, pp. 37-38.
15. Βικέλας, Δ., *Λουκή και Λάρας* (Athens 2000), introduction, p. 38; Καρδάσης, Β., *Έλληνες ομογενείς στη Νότια Ρωσία, 1775-1861* (Athens 1998), p. 221.
16. Χαρλαύτη, Τ., *Ιστορία της ελληνόκτητης ναυτιλίας, 19ος-20ός αιώνας* (Athens 2001), appendixes 1.4, 1.5, pp. 471-474.
17. Vasileios Melas, uncle of Dimitrios Vikelas, married with Terpsichori Geralopoulou, who came from Smyrna but had settled in Syros, whereas Vikelas married Terpsichori's sister, Kalliopi. Such kinds of marriages were a common phenomenon in the context of the endogamy amongst the social group of the grand merchants of the era, in order to preserve cohesion and fortune. See Καρδάσης, Β., *Έλληνες ομογενείς στη Νότια Ρωσία, 1775-1861* (Athens 1998), p. 204.
18. Μελάς, Λ.Ι., *Ηπειρωτικές μελέτες. Μία οικογένεια, μία ιστορία* (Athens 1967), pp. 198-199; Βικέλας, Δ., *Η ζωή μου. Άπαντα τα ευρισκόμενα και η συμβολή του στους Ολυμπιακούς Αγώνες του 1896* (Θησαυρός της Ελληνικής Γλώσσας 2004), in Cd-Rom; Χαρλαύτη, Τ., *Ιστορία της ελληνόκτητης ναυτιλίας, 19ος-20ός αιώνας* (Athens 2001), p. 149.
19. Βικέλας, Δ., *Λουκής Λάρας* (Athens 2000), introduction, p. 47-50 ; Sturdza, M.-D., *Dictionnaire historique et généalogique des grandes familles de Grèce, d'Albanie et de Constantinople* (Paris 1983), p. 343.
20. Sturdza, M.-D., *Dictionnaire historique et généalogique des grandes familles de Grèce, d'Albanie et de Constantinople* (Paris 1983), p. 342-343 ; Μελάς, Λ.Ι., *Ηπειρωτικές μελέτες. Μία οικογένεια, μία ιστορία* (Athens 1967), p. 292.

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	Καρδάσης Β. , <i>Έλληνες ομογενείς στη νότια Ρωσία 1775-1861</i> , Αλεξάνδρεια, Αθήνα 1998
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