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The Monument of Zalongo

1954-1960



A SCULPTURE FOR THE DANCE OF ZALONGO

A short history

The sculpture for the Monument of Zalongo, a work by the sculptor George Zongolopoulos, is situated at the edge of a cliff on mount Zalongo, where, in December 1803, dozens of heroic women from Souli, along with their children, threw themselves off, when their town, after years of resistance, fell to Ali Sasha and the residents were forced to abandon their homes.

The dance of Zalongo, as a true or mythologized event, continues to inspire us as an act of heroism, demonstrating the Souliot women's strength, their determination to remain free. It stands as a symbol of remembrance and ultimate sacrifice to the ideal of freedom and human dignity.

The Monument of Zalongo is located northwest of Preveza, at a distance of 29 kilometers from the city, at an altitude of 700 meters, and it is visible from a distance of 35 kilometers. The nearest settlement is Kamarina, and access to the monument is through a cobbled path of 410 steps, which begins at the Monastery of Aghios Dimitrios, located at a lower altitude. Close to the Monument stands the Monastery of the Archangel Michael, which is thought to be the oldest monastery in Epirus, built around 400 BC (1st century), and the ruins of ancient Kassopi, an important town of the 3rd century, featuring an ancient theater.

The sculpture by Zongolopoulos, spanning 18 meters in length and 15 meters in height, is an abstract depiction of six female figures who, hand-in-hand, lead the dance, growing larger as they get closer to the edge of the cliff, where, gigantic, they become symbols of sacrifice and the love of freedom.

The work's story begins in Florence, Italy, in 1953, where George Zongolopoulos and his wife, the painter Eleni Paschalidou-Zongolopoulou, are staying, on a scholarship by the State Scholarships Foundation that Zongolopoulos had received the previous year. During that time, Zongolopoulos was given the opportunity to study the artworks of the Italian Renaissance closely, and learn the techniques of bronze casting, while there was also a shift in his work from realism to abstraction without, however, losing sight entirely on the anthropomorphic models. The pureness of forms, composition and concept, uniform soft lighting, solid forms made with smooth transitions, a simple and distinct arrangement, the rendition and organization of structures, fundamental features of the Florentine school, are incorporated into the sculpture for Zalongo, which George Zongolopoulos begins working on excitedly as soon as he hears of the competition for the Monument of Zalongo from his friend, architect Patroklos Karantinos.

The Ministry of Education's announcement of the pan-Hellenic competition for sculptors and architects is published on May 11, 1953. Karantinos and Zongolopoulos take part in the competition with a total of four proposals.



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The judging committee, made up of Kleomenis Tsitsaras - Governor of Epirus, Spyros Kafetzis, Prefect of Preveza, Georgios Pantzaris - head of the Ministry of Education's Technical Service, and the sculptors Michael Tombros and Vasos Falireas, originally decides to award first prize to the architectural solution submitted by Patroklos Karantinos, but the proposal gives rise negative reactions and is subsequently rejected. Thus, the committee decides to implement the sculptural composition by George Zongolopoulos. Karantinos himself declared, years later, that the architecture and sculpture of the Monument of Zalongo are credited entirely to George Zongolopoulos.

The construction works began in July 1954 and were completed in 1960, under the general supervision of George Zongolopoulos and Patroklos Karantinos, who waived any remuneration for their work. The technical application was assigned to the marble craftsman Eleftherios Gyftopoulos, upon the recommendation of Zongolopoulos and Karantinos. On the eastern side of the work's pedestal, a slab from the early stages of construction survives, bearing the inscription: "George Zongolopoulos, sculptor, Patroklos Karantinos, architect, technical supervision Eleftherios Gyftopoulos".

The project's funding was supported financially by two nationwide student fundraisers, which is arguably unique in the history of Greece, when it comes to the construction of a sculpture.

The project entailed several construction challenges from the start, since the approximately 4,300 limestone blocks required, each measuring 40x20x25 cm, had to be procured from the wider region of Ioannina, transported across a distance of 160 Km, and carved on site. The sculpture's core was made of reinforced concrete. The building materials (sand, gravel, cement, water, wood) were originally transported by hand; an improvised aerial lifting mechanism, 270 meters in length, was constructed later to take over, and considered a feat for its time.

Significant contributions in the construction of the Monument were made by the residents of Kamarina, whom Zongolopoulos praised frequently for their help, as well as by the First Corps of the VIII Army Division (catering, roadworks, etc). Zongolopoulos himself, and his wife Eleni, traveled in military vehicles for six years, in the 3-4 months between spring and early summer each year, for the construction and completion of the project.

The completion and unveiling of the Monument took place on the 10th of June 1961, "in the presence of Royalty and thousands of citizens", according to the contemporary press.

The Monument receives approximately 30,000 visitors each year. The Municipality of Preveza organizes a large festival, the "Zalongia", each summer, with the participation of dance groups and cultural associations. Between 2008 and 2013, the Municipality of Zalongo and the George Zongolopoulos Foundation commissioned extensive maintenance and restoration works on the sculpture, which had suffered damages from the passage of time and lightning.



A SCULPTURE FOR THE DANCE OF ZALONGO

Impressions of the sculpture

I first visited the Monument of Zalongo in 2007, having been commissioned by the George Zongolopoulos Foundation to oversee the project of its three-dimensional photogrammetric mapping by the photogrammetry laboratory of the University of Athens School of Surveying Engineering, and, subsequently, the maintenance and restoration works spanning five years.

I was therefore given the opportunity to visit the Monument in excess of 25 times, and to "scale" the scaffolding all the way to the top. Each time I visited the sculpture was like getting to know a friend better and better, and every time I touched its perfectly carved stones, my admiration for Zongolopoulos, who conceived of this work in 1953 in Florence, grew.

Most times I came across numerous visitors - Greek and foreign alike - who spoke of Zongolopoulos' work with enthusiasm, love and respect. People of all ages who, despite the 410 steps they had to climb and descend - since that is the only way to reach the sculpture - had the strength and drive to see it up close and walk around it. I lose track of how many visitors told me, full of admiration and pride, that "the true sense of Greece is here"! I will never forget the literature teacher walking down the steps and singing the dance of Zalongo song out loud, or the echo of her voice, as she walked away reciting verse by Aristotelis Valaoritis, or the woman with a large section across her chest, struggling up the steps after open heart surgery!

The sculpture is situated at the edge of the cliff, on a natural terrace of mount Zalongo. The site is theatrical, magical - across from ancient Kassopi. On the winding ascent towards the sculpture, it comes in and out of view constantly until, when you reach the top, it reveals itself to you suddenly, in the catalytic effect of the light, with a peaceful harmony, deliberate in its completeness.

You approach it from the direction of the back of the figures and, as they gaze sequentially over the precipice, ancient Kassopi and the horizon of the Ionian Sea, they invite you to join them in taking in the magnificent view. The sheer, robust form of the sculpture cuts across the distant and endless blue of the sea in the west and the mountain range of Pindos, almost in its entirety, in the east. The large gaps - vaulted openings - created by the figures holding hands are penetrated from all directions by the distant horizons and the wind, as the scents and colors of the landscape merge with the sculpture. Visitors walk through and meet in these gaps, engaging with and sharing the space, lending it pliability and flow.

In ARTI magazine (May - July, 1993), Jean - Luc Epivent notes:

"One of Zongolopoulos qualities is the skill with which he has mastered monumental art.

He knows how to express himself as an astonishing liberator of space, in the strongest meaning of the world, that where the natural space of dimensions leads us to the most profound space that exists, the most fluid and the most familiar: our genuine physic space. From this point of view, the Monument of Zalongo is entirely representative. Fifteen meters high, visible from a distance of 35 kilometers, it is constructed on the top of a rock as a memorial to the heroines who died nearby. Here everything has been simplified - the lines, the planes, the volumes - everything reduced to the essentials, everything culminating in a rising: the dazzling white stone raised against the blue sky to stress a message similar to a prayer, a message of such profundity, of such value, aspiring towards the light with the eternal blessing of the sea."



A SCULPTURE FOR THE DANCE OF ZALONGO

Impressions of the sculpture

In the daytime, the strong light disembodies the sculpture. The rippled and curved surfaces become malleable masses that sometimes extend and project into the light and sometimes recede into shadow. As Zongolopoulos himself wrote: *"sculpture is made with many masses; it is also made with lines. Sculpture today can just as well be a shadow. It is not just about mass, about solidity"*.

As the sun moves across the sky, the sculpture transforms and that ever-alternating relationship between shadow and light gives visitors the impression that the figures are in motion, that they are alive. As the wind rushes through the gaps between the solid forms of the sculpture and caresses the perfectly polished surfaces of the stone, you can almost hear it breathing. As Zongolopoulos used to say *"...in my work, what I want is for the work to breathe. When I say "breathe", it can be a transparency or anything else."*

The massive stone female forms take on symbolic dimensions, and transmute into lightweight and graceful figures, with substance and an inner life. The forms grow and broaden, too big for the landscape to contain them. Overturning the confinement of their weight, they dance, each of their bodies twisted slightly in a different direction, and their mass disappears, thanks to the optical corrections incorporated in the sculpture. The plan view of the Monument itself denotes the dance of the Souliot women towards immortality.

In a letter from Florence in May 1953 to his friend Patroklos Karantinos, Zongolopoulos remarks: *"At the same time, I began to see that the concept of perforation gives me the opportunity to create plastic contrasts between forms and horizon. The plastic contrasts are always rooted in the theme of dance or, rather, a rhythmic sense of dance, with the available means of construction and the corresponding feeling that each of us has"*. The dramatic quality of the figures culminates in the first and largest, the one leading the dance, whose aspect, as she appears, gigantic, on the edge of the cliff, is sliced vertically, taking on the shape of the precipice below.

Traces of the influence of architecture on Zongolopoulos are evident in the sculpture, in the vaulted gaps between forms that evoke Byzantine or gothic arches. The entire structure consists exclusively of rounded shapes and surfaces, reminiscent of the curved sculptural pursuits of Gaudi. Other features of the sculpture refer to an archaic form of abstraction, but bring to mind the plasticity and purity of Italian sculpture that Zongolopoulos was studying at the time of its conception. Prevailing is a sense that this is a sculpture made up of space rather than mass, while every individual conceptual or aesthetic element belongs to the totality of the piece. The near and the far, the fullness and the void become one. Zongolopoulos mentions that in the sculpture for Zalongo *"I realized that void plus fullness equals one"*, and it's a theme that he revisits several times over the next few years. There is no distinction between the surrounding space and the form that it contains, vacant forms have the same plastic value as the filled ones: the void and the fullness are two substances of different densities that complement one another.



A SCULPTURE FOR THE DANCE OF ZALONGO

Impressions of the sculpture

George Zongolopoulos himself rarely spoke of the sculpture. Perhaps because he was always looking to the future, always seeking new forms of expression without going back to old work or resting on his laurels.

Nevertheless, this sculpture incorporates all the love, passion, skill and vision that Zongolopoulos had for sculpture at that time.

According to him, a sculpture can also be interpreted in musical terms: *"...when you see a work with a particular rhythm, it takes you somewhere, even acoustically if you like... it is interpreted instinctively inside of you. Not that it is written in the form of music, no. The motives the work gives you might sound like music"*.

From the Monument of Zalongo, as it rises silent, harmonious and majestic, the echo of that music resounds across the landscape while, in its simplicity, it stays open to different interpretations and versions.

Let's recall, at this point, the words of Goethe: *"Stones are mute teachers; they silence the observer, and the most valuable lesson we learn from them we cannot communicate"*.

Angelos Moretis

Architect,

Director of the George Zongolopoulos Foundation