

# Prevention of childhood drowning on a Greek island in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: literal testimonies by two native writers

Alexandros Koussounis<sup>1</sup>, Effie Poulakou-Rebelakou<sup>2</sup>, Ioannis Matsoukis<sup>1</sup>,  
 Costas Tsiamis<sup>2</sup>, Eleni Petridou<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Hygiene, Epidemiology, and Medical Statistics, Athens University Medical School, Athens, Greece

<sup>2</sup>History of Medicine, Athens University Medical School, Athens, Greece

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** To present literal texts of two native writers about drowning during childhood, along with a successful simple preventive measure implemented by the community of a small Greek island.

**Materials and methods:** Review of the older Greek literal production as well as of the contemporary literature on childhood drowning and related preventive measures.

**Results:** Alexander Papadiamantis (1851–1911) from the island of Skiathos is a writer, who described, with intellectual language, the microcosm of his place of birth, which he always remembered with nostalgia. Alexander Moraitidis (1850–1929), his cousin, also from the same island, used a different style to describe life events in the small society. Both refer to tragic intentional and unintentional drowning events in wells and the sea, which took place in their times or before and survived as local legends in their narrations. Both describe effective initiatives undertaken by families themselves to prevent childhood drowning by hiring, during the summer months, a guardian with a specific duty to closely supervise the children and enforce guidelines for swimming in the sea. Papadiamantis goes one step further to describe the dismal consequences when the rules were not respected.

**Conclusions:** The literal testimonies of two Greek islander writers present the range of childhood drowning occurring on the island and a primitive yet effective community initiative for accident and drowning prevention pertaining to better supervision by an ad hoc employed guardian; this sets the example of the social responsibility ethos on the part of local communities to safeguard children from drowning that could serve as a good practice even in modern times.

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**Key words:** aquatics, childhood drowning, drowning prevention, Greek islands, Greek literature, preventive measures, supervision, swimming education

## INTRODUCTION

Drowning, a distinct type of injury associated with high fatality rate, was a major cause of death among children in all historical periods. Records of 15<sup>th</sup> century about adult drowning provide support for a risk profile more similar than different to that in our times, especially in the poorer parts of the world. The sea and coastal margins were the more common place of occurrence (32%), followed by stre-

ams and rivers (26%). Ponds, water pits, ditches, and wells were also common [1]. The drowning mortality rate among children in Greece, a country with a lengthy 16,000 km coastline and hundreds of inhabited islands, is nowadays 1 per 1,000,000 population [2]. Drowning remains the most prominent in the memory of Greek people among other types of accidents and injuries, as they co-existed and lived with and by the sea, leaving families in grief and



Effie Poulakou-Rebelakou, History of Medicine, Athens Medical School, University of Athens, 75 M. Asias Athens 11527, Greece, tel: 0030-210-7462122, fax: 0030-213-2088610, e-mail: efpoulrebel@med.uoa.gr, efpoulrebel@yahoo.gr

filling the entire social circle with emotion, inspiring writers and contemporary media, and often acquiring legendary dimensions. Greece will never forget the Cretan girls lost a few decades ago when their boat, which they had boarded without knowing how to swim, overturned. The tragic accident took place in the small port of Georgoupolis, Chania (named after the accident “Bay of the 21 virgins”) on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1972 when the 4 lower classes of the High School of Spili (a village on the mountains) visited the place on the occasion of a school excursion. As the majority of the students had never even seen the sea before and more than 25 girls (aged 12–15 years) entered a small boat identified as having 10-person capacity, 21 of them were drowned when the boat overturned and they were trapped in fishing nets. Each of Greece’s many islands and coastal areas have lamented minors who have escaped the custody of parents and escorts, who overestimated their abilities or underestimated the power of the sea, in ideal climatic conditions that favour swimming almost throughout the year. Additionally, cisterns, lakes, wells in earlier times, and domestic swimming pools in nowadays as well as those in public places, such as hotels and sports facilities, all these water environments represent threats to children’s lives [3]. New risks have replaced the now rare structures but the number of victims and near-victims maintaining at an alarming level, require the constant vigilance of adults.

### THE ROLE OF THE SEA IN THE CHILDREN’S WORLD

Refraining from vociferousness and accusations, the authors analysed here focus on the inexplicable allure of the sea to children, familiar with it in every respect: swimming, playing, fishing, and being on boats, sometimes without parental supervision or even consent. These adventurous joys inspire children’s imagination: fairy-tale pirates and bold seafarers, submarines and vessels searching the oceans, deriving from cinema and TV, aquariums and sea parks with spectacular events. Feeling the urge to mimic diving competitions and creating a virtual image of the sea in their perception, children ignore the inhospitable or even outright hostile environment. A child’s mind has no place for practicalities that necessitate caution in our relations with the sea, such as malaise, fatigue, or overeating.

This paper focuses on a small island of the Aegean Sea, namely Skiathos. The island of Skiathos and the neighbouring island of Skopelos became famous as tourist destinations due to the very successful cinema movie “Mamma mia!” (2008). During the two decades described by the two authors from Skiathos, Papadiamandis, and Moraitidis (1888–1908), the peasants lived on land cultivation, sheep and goat breeding, and fishing or otherwise migrated, usually to the United States. These islanders were kept for

a long time in a state of backwardness and perpetual poverty, depended on their proximity to urban centres or contact with merchants and travellers [4].

The description by Alexander Moraitidis, clearly based on his own memories and experiences of a winter’s day on the island (eve of St. Nicholas’ day, December 6<sup>th</sup>), is unique in the way it presents the allure of the sea for the young: *The sea has moved a few feet away from the shore, revealing a sweet-smelling, clear beach, with glistening multi-coloured pebbles ... Soon, the happy groups of children will arrive, singing in harmony “to the beach, to the beach” and will scatter on the beach, with muddy shoes or with no shoes at all, to inspect the shiny things on the shore...* [5].

### REFLECTION OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE GREEK LITERATURE

The sources of inspiration, especially for the islanders-authors, are the local narrations preserving the collective memory. Since 1830, the landmark year of the establishment of the independent Modern Greek state, its literature, following various ideological, stylistic, and aesthetic trends, remains the main expressive medium for all aspects of life [6, 7]. Furthermore, the recording of a huge amount of data on everyday life creates a large database, enhancing historical evidence or even replacing it. Filtered through temporal distance and nostalgic feel, the childhood dream returns to the pages of the prose writers, who highlight innocence and carelessness, ignorance of danger, and insatiable curiosity [8].

The first author, Alexandros Papadiamandis (1851–1911), was born in the island of Skiathos but lived for a long time in Athens, the capital of the country, working as journalist and translator [9]. He is described as a low-profile man, lost in reveries, quite melancholic, pious, and wishing to become a monk [10]. Most of his work was inspired by his homeland, driving his readers back to the lost paradise of innocence [11], but the realistic representation of disaster, loss, mourning, fate, and defeat is also present [12].

The second writer, Alexandros Moraitidis (1850–1929), also born in Skiathos, lived most of his life in Athens, working as schoolteacher and journalist [6]. He had frequently confessed that he suffered from “a painful nostalgia of epic dimensions”. In the last year of his life he became a monk, according to his permanent wish [7]. A special mention for the translator’s approach is quite necessary for English-speaking readers. These texts present particularities because the style is influenced by ecclesiastical dialect, religious chants, and older forms of Greeks such as byzantine [11]. The rhythm of reading sounds melodic to the native ear but fades in English, offering, anyway, by its translation, a view of older lifestyles in the Greek islands.

## LITERARY WORKS ON THE SUBJECT OF DROWNING

That “Literature exists because real life exists” is maintained by critics [10]. Realism enabled authors to reproduce a chain of scenes and pictures placing great emphasis on the manifestations of the personality of the child, exploring those characters that seem accident-prone, in the tradition of the hero of Marc Twain, Tom Sawyer. Authors are always interested in adventurous minors with a thirst for experience, curiosity, impatience, flightiness, seeking adventure, with spontaneity and superficial mimicking, exhibitionism, a need to show off and be admired by other children and adults. Especially for adolescents, the favourite topic of most writers, there are aspects of their behaviour associated with the risk of accidents: contempt for danger, a self-destructive attitude and provocative actions aiming to their self-determination.

Some drowning accidents occur in the literal pages of these native authors:

A 7-year-old girl is left without supervision in a neighbouring court and is found drowned in an unattended open well (“The luck from America”, 1901) [13].

A 2-year-old girl is the hero of a tragedy in the joyous atmosphere of Easter preparations on Maundy Thursday. She is left unattended near a well, forgotten and uncovered: *suddenly a loud splash was heard, like a body falling in water and a muffled scream and then a second, louder*. The author describes the panic prevailing and the delay that was fatal for the life of the minor (“The last godchild”, 1888) [14]. Perhaps this is the description of an actual event in the author’s memory, as its setting in time corresponds to his period of childhood in the 1850s. It is also notable that, contrary to boys, who drowned in the sea, all the young heroes who drowned in wells were girls.

Intentional drowning of girls and female infants is presented as “accidental” drowning (“The murderess”, 1903); the victims of the elderly serial-killer island woman are all girls perceived as a heavy burden upon their family, due to local customs of necessitating endowments in order to get married. After strangling her own grandchild, she continued her work with two girls she meets while fleeing. Shortly afterwards, she grew irritated by the voices of some small girls during their game, who, in her opinion, were much noisier than boys. One of them was standing alone, leaning over the gap of the well; before the old woman had time to perform her murderous act, an accidental drowning joins the string of murders. The murderess was unable to explain how her illegal desire had come true without her own murderous intervention, leading her mind to further confusion. The author’s gimmick of presenting a childhood accident with the same result (drowning) amongst the murders lends the story a metaphysical dimension [15, 16].

A 9-year-old girl escapes her mother’s supervision and heads off in search of her grandmother washing at a neighbouring coast but gets on the wrong track, a downhill path that is steep and leads to a rock. As she tries in vain to return and attempts to find the path from which she came, she loses her balance and falls into the sea: nobody heard her scream. The body was found by a seal in the shallows, the only creature mourning this unfair and unexpected death (“The lamentation of the seal”, 1908) [17].

## DROWNING PREVENTION MEASURES IN THE ISLAND OF SKIATHOS

These two short stories (“The drowning of the child”, by Papadiamandis [18], “1900 and Altanou”, by Moraitidis [19], 1899) were published in a one-year period, in two different literal magazines, connected by the double presence of an existing person, the children’s policeman, Tsitsoukas, entrusted with the task of supervising minors and preventing them from drowning. The most interesting element in this primitive attempt at prevention of drowning by the islanders is the decision to recruit a children’s policeman. Papadiamandis specifies that Constantine Tsitsoukas had worked as “*rural constable, usher of the local police, and as children’s policeman, for a fee of thirty drachmas a month*”. He is described as “*having a loud voice, feared by children and adults alike*”. He writes that in the early 1870s and for 2–3 years Tsitsoukas worked as a children’s policeman at the school. The author confesses that the shore had never been so free of young children from one end to another, the coves and rocks deserted by truant primary and secondary school pupils and the crabs and clams left in peace. He mentions the measures planned and implemented, imposed by the children’s policeman, Tsitsoukas: *Swimming was permitted only in the morning and evening hours in the summer for children. All-day stay on the beach and repeated entry in the sea more than the allowed two times was prohibited, as the “young gadabouts” used to enter the sea 8–10 times a day. Diving was allowed from boats and other vessels only with the permission of the owner. But the status of diving was governed by a code of good methodology: no dives head-first only body-first, not from other parts of boats but only from the gunnel and from the height of the base of the two large sails. All the children of the island had to memorize, know, and apply this unwritten regulation, both pupils of the school and the wild street gamins, without supervision, guardian or family.*

The results of the rigorous application of these measures worked 100%, and in the first two years of Tsitsouka’s office no child on the island drowned. On a summer noon of the third year, he arrested a child on the beach for violating the regulation and swimming during a prohibited time for minors. His father behaved impolitely to him, defending his

own child and supporting the illegal action. Tsitsoukas did not answer and continued performing his duties but with less zeal. The next summer, in the silence of noon, a scream for help revealed that this same child was drowning.

Moraitidis represents the same person, Tsitsoukas, in his short story about a widow called Altanou who lost her husband and five children, all victims of the sea. She swore to protect her last child, Manolis, from the sea, but it seemed impossible on an island where shipping and fishing was the only proven livelihood. Manolis headed to the sea whenever he could escape his mother and school. The presence of Tsitsoukas here is slightly different from the corresponding story of Papadiamandis. Moraitidis describes him as “a caveman, with a thick, knitted seafarer’s whip”. His usual victim on the island was Manolis, whom he met “without his cap, shoes, overcoat, with his trousers up to his knees, wading in the sea, with a folder full of crabs instead of books”. The survey over the adventurous boy was permanent, even during the school examinations, which all students attended; once more Tsitsoukas arrested Manolis for fishing at another beach.

## DISCUSSION

The geography of the country, with numerous islands and lengthy coastlines, entails a constellation of environmental risk factors for childhood drowning [2], a worldwide problem and a major cause of death and disability on account of injury. Each year an estimated 150,000 people die from drowning worldwide. Probably 2–20 times more victims are admitted to hospital for observation and treatment [20]. Drowning is among the leading cause of death due to injuries among children aged 5 through 14 years in both genders [21, 22]. In particular, the Greek peninsula and the islands offer not only miles of seaside but, furthermore, the most favourable climate for swimming and enjoying boat trips and various games in the water [23]. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, swimming pools became fashionable as a means of participation in aquatic activities, not only during the extended Greek summer, in places both near and away from the seashore; indeed drowning is considered as the unintentional injury death with the greatest seasonal variation. The majority of children over 5 years old have nowadays acquired swimming skills. Yet, the new landscape in the already dark horizon of drowning statistics points to a persistent need to obtain water safety behaviour [24]. Thus, above and beyond the swimming training programs available for children less than 5 years old [25], and the favoured early teaching of water safety [26], most experts agree that inadequate parental supervision is the most common factor associated with drowning [27–29].

Apart from the specialists, including lifeguards on every organised beach, swimming instructors, and trainers, this diachronic problem has stimulated, from a very different

perspective, the interest of Greek poets and prose authors. With their huge emotional resources channelled through a proliferation of literature, along with other accidents, drowning cast a shadow over the bright summer months, as they realistically reflected on the conditions that lead to this repeated tragedy. The two writers from Skiathos Island (Papadiamandis and Moraitidis) recalling from memory the circumstances of everyday life 120 years before coincide with regard to the beloved figure of the strict hired guardian who believed in his mission but was desperately disappointed when his contribution in averting childhood drowning over the past years was not recognised. His recruitment by the local authorities is one of the first preventive measures taken concerning childhood accidents in general and drowning in particular. Indeed, as the community leaders, who became aware of the silent risk towards the youth, who admittedly underestimate the risks, decided to take action by setting a framework regulating the children’s relationship with water. The person selected to undertake the role of the formal protector of children from environmental hazards acknowledged by the community was punctual, accurate, conscientious, and fully aware of his duties. The two drowning-free years represent the island’s golden record in safety, offering parents a peaceful and relaxing time. Both authors imply parental approval, without making specific references to this. The parental trust and respect of the community to the guardian are clearly demonstrated through their exaggerated reactions when he is first directly questioned. The lack of recognition for his work, as a single verbal dispute, led the guardian Tsitsoukas to negligence and the reluctant exercise of his duties, resulting to the total failure of any prevention.

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