The Modern Ancient Greeks

**Tamata Thamata**

|  |
| --- |
| ***BY ADRIAN VRETTOS & JANET MCGIFFIN***  *Adrian Vrettos is a field archaeologist whose work takes him to café-bars where he observes his fellow Athenians whom he calls “The Modern Ancient Greeks.”*  *Janet McGiffin is author of the four-book historical fiction series about the 8th Century Byzantine Empress Irini of Athens who poisoned her way to the throne of Constantinople. Janet can be reached through her website at* [*janmcgiffin.com*](https://janmcgiffin.com/)*.*  *This article appears in Matt Barrett’s* [*greecetravel.com “The Modern Ancients”*](https://www.athensguide.com/journalists/articles/tamata.htm) |
| MY SENSE of humour was ailing. My friends told me that it would take a miracle to heal it whilst living in my peripatetic, apartmentless state, sleeping on Yannis' floor with two dogs at a time when I was lacking a job and my apartment was being rented out.  "A miracle?" I said. "Great! I'll go get one!" Having been raised a devout Orthodox, I knew that miracles were had for the asking in all the Orthodox churches. You can get them by offering *tamata*.  *Tamata* (meaning “miracles”) are votive offerings or promises made of rectangular pieces of metal with miniature body parts shaped on them. They are tin, silver, or gold, the choice of which depends on the amount of faith or the amount in the wallet. There is no actual record or evidence that a more costly *tama* is more effective than the cheaper tin one. I find this heartening.  *Tamata* are the symbols of the miracle of healing which is hoped to occur, or has already occurred. They are the vehicle in which we invest our faith. So they are an integral part of the miracle. *Tamata* are a link between the person and the Holy spirit.  When a loved one is ailing, Modern Ancient Greeks buy *tamata* at the nearby religious supply shop which are near churches. In Athens, you can find *tamata* ranging from animals to houses and ears to ankles. In the odd case they don't have the right body part for you, vendors can be inventive. A friend of mine looking for a kidney was offered two livers.  Modern Ancient Greeks then take the *tama* to the church of their choice and ask the priest to tie it with a ribbon to a horizontal pole under the icon of their chosen saint. *Tamata* conveniently have holes at one end for this purpose.  Which saint? My grandmother chooses her saints from dreams. When my uncle was ill, she had a dream to hang a *tama*, offer *koulourakia* (round coffee biscuits), and light a candle at the Panagia church near her home on the island of Andros. Lo and behold, my uncle recovered from his cold after a week. She has sent biscuits and money to this church once a year ever since.  If you want to do this, the procedure is simple. Buy a *tama*, ask a priest to hang it in a church, light a candle. Any offerings into the coin box will be gladly accepted by the church.  *Tamata* are an ancient tradition. *Tamata* made of clay have been found at ancient Greek healing centres and temples, such as religious sites of the Pre-palatial Bronze Age around 3,000 BC, on Crete. They have also been found at 8th century BC sites, such as at Amphiarion where the majority were still made of pottery and wood, but metal ones had begun to appear.  The major ancient Greek god linked with healing was Apollo, and, interestingly, in Modern Ancient Greece, *tamata* can be purchased in the Byzantine church supply shops on Apollonos Street near the Mitropolis church.  So I went searching for a miracle to cure an ailing sense of humour. Like my grandmother, that night I had a dream. But, in my dream, I was being chased by a packet of cigarettes up the steep mountainside to the Profitas Ilias monastery on the island of Hydra, which is three hours by ferry from Pireaus, plus two hours' uphill hike, and isn't open to the public. So instead I decided to go to my local church, Agios Ioannis Theologos, an 11th century Byzantine church in the Plaka which is full of miracles hanging under icons.  But first I had to buy a token miracle for myself. I started down Apollonos Street in search of tamata. Here's a typical conversation that took place during my search, translated from the Greek:  "To your health! (*Yia sou*)"  "To your health!"  "Do you have any miracles?"  "Of course. What kind?"  "I need a sense of humour."  "Sorry, I don't have any. What part of the body is that in?"  "Good question."  "I've got a head. Is it in the head?"  "I don't know."  "Maybe it's in the heart. I have a lot of hearts, different shapes."  "I don't know."  "Here, take the whole body. And pray. That will be five Euros."  I took the *tama* to Agios Ioannis Theologos, lit a candle, and said a prayer. While I was praying, a priest came up.  "What can I help you with, my son?" he inquired, with concern.  "My sense of humour is ailing, Father."  "Surely that's impossible for a Greek. Tell me a joke and I'm sure it will be funny."  "A priest, a rabbi and a minister were out in a boat..."  At this point, he showed me the door. This lifted my spirits. My votive offering was already working! To make sure, I phoned my grandmother for advice.  "Granny, my sense of humour is ailing. I need a miracle."  "Don't be stupid," she snapped. "Get a job."  Link to [Adrian’s other articles:](https://muckrack.com/adrian-vrettos)  And more in Matt Barrett’s [Athens Guide](https://www.athensguide.com/journalists/index.htm) |