

HISTORIC VILLAGES IN GREECE OPPORTUNITIES AND PROBLEMS TOWARDS THEIR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Eleni Maistrou

Architect, professor NTUA

elmais@central.ntua.gr

Abstract

One of the problems present in mountainous historic settlements in Greece is their abandonment. At times, this abandonment is accompanied with modern interventions which alter their buildings or/and image. A typical example is presented by the settlements of Mani in the Peloponnese. These settlements have been developed through a singular social and financial organization and they have been noted for the unique architecture of their buildings, preserved to this day. One of the most important and well-known settlements is Vatheia at Southern Mani, which has been abandoned by its residents, despite the efforts for development, the most important of which being the program undertaken in 1975 by the National Tourism Organization. Today, the settlement is visited by Greeks and foreigners who wander around the premises, despite the difficulty to do so in the settlement's interior, due to its nature as well as its ruinous state. What is mainly searched for the settlement of Mani is to find a new economic basis which can be based on the settlement's historic and cultural interest as well as on its unique natural environment, in order to lead to the reformation of its social structure.

Keywords: *Abandoned mountainous settlements, Protection, Development, Upgrading.*

Introduction

Greece disposes a considerable number of historic villages and cultural landscapes formed by the interaction between natural and human factors that constitute its cultural wealth and can become a considerable financial resource, with the proper management. Some of these villages –particularly some coastal ones– have been developed uncontrollably and thus altered by negative development and touristic over-development. To the contrary, the mountainous villages, through modern socioeconomic mutation, have lost or are losing their active population and are gradually deserted and dilapidated. The paradox in this is, however, that along with the abandonment that they suffer from their permanent population, in some cases, modern interventions come to alter their buildings or/and their image, through a trend of unplanned touristic development.

The example of Mani

A typical example of this can be provided by the villages of Mani in the Peloponnese. These range on the south slopes of mount Taygetos on a rocky, rough, unreachable territory. They boast a remarkable natural and built environment and landscape and a long history, carved in their buildings.

Mani constitutes a special housing unity in a strategic site, relatively cut off from the rest of Greece, but still turned towards the large-scale sea routes¹. During the Ottoman rule, through its robust resistance, Mani remained autonomous and free and it offered safe refuge to the persecuted from other lands. The region's inaccessibility and the constant martial readiness of its residents obliged the Turks to accept a special status of autonomy and self-administration for Mani.

At the time of their prime, the villages of Mani did not communicate easily between them and their inhabitants lived fairly secluded in small social groups, particularly at Mesa (Inner) Mani, where each family disposed a fortified tower for its protection, and next to it stood residences for its members. The area's territorial formulation and the warfare capabilities that developed the people of Mani, rendered it unattainable by its enemies.

Today, this territorial formulation hinders the development of local productive activities. This fact, combined with the socioeconomic mutations of the 20th century and the two wars which intervened, has led to the demotion of the active population of the settlements of Mani towards the big cities or abroad and to their gradual desertification. The large number of heirs of the deserted buildings and the difficulty in finding them, combined with the difficulty in the productive reform of the country's mountainous regions, renders problematic the revival of the villages, which, at best, become partially alive during the summer, through the temporary presence of their former permanent residents or their offspring.

Vatheia

One of the most known and conserved villages of Mani, which is abandoned today, is that of Vatheia. Built at the top of a hill, it disposes buildings dated from 1840 to 1920, when the village reached its prime with approximately 400 residents, who were occupied with agriculture, stockbreeding, hunting, as well as with piracy! This last activity was lucrative until the middle of the 19th century, when pirates became more scarce, hence the beginning of the cultivation of olive trees. Four oil-presses were in operation at Vatheia.

The core of the social and financial organization of Vatheia – as well as of the other settlements in Mani – was the armed blood-related groups. Through the rough fight among the clans (families) for their dominance, the notion of the vendetta developed², which was the punishment of an act committed to the detriment of a family. As the vendetta often aimed at the complete annihilation of the opposite family, during the time of the strife, the two opposing parties as well as the other families would shut themselves in their compounds. The building structure can be interpreted through the patriarchal organization of society as well as the need for isolation and protection.

Buildings at Vatheia are towers, house-towers and adjacent houses, depicting the social conditions having created them and the social differences at Mani, and the additions and transformations that they underwent express the evolution of families through time. The **house** is composed of one or two consecutive rooms, under a two-pitched wooden roof. The **tower-house** is the transitional phase of the house into a tower, as one of the two rooms is elevated by one or two levels. Finally, the **tower** is formed by a 3.00 X 4.00 m. area, repeated in its elevation at 3 – 4 levels, thus reaching a height of about 11.00 meters and ending on a soffit for defense purposes. At some stage in their lives, the aforementioned buildings are

¹ G. Saïtas, architect; «MANI» in the issue «Greek Traditional Architecture» Melissa editions.

² <http://www.mani.org.gr/mani/>

complemented by **outhouses** of dried brick, mainly used as auxiliary spaces³ (*K.Papantoniou 1987*)

Efforts for development

In 1975, Vatheia's population was down to 4-7 elders. The village did not have electricity, water, not even an access road. On that year –the year of Architectural Heritage– the Greek National Tourism Organization launched a program for the revival of traditional villages, with architect Aris Konstantinidis at its head. It aimed at the conservation and restoration of historic buildings, in order for them to house touristic activities or other relevant activities, such as museums, restaurants, municipal offices, weaving mills, etc. The program is the first connection of tourism development with the architectural heritage. It included 6 villages, among which Vatheia at Mani, and it anticipated the building's restoration, the concession of their exploitation at the GNTO for 11 years initially and then the restitution of the buildings with their new use to their owners.

Despite the program's success in other settlements, at Vatheia the program unfortunately failed, because only 11 buildings were able to be restored, and when they were returned to their owners, they functioned as guest-houses for a certain period of time and they were then abandoned.

Today, the historic settlement is abandoned, with most of its constructions in ruin and the old paths are blocked by vegetation or decrepit buildings. Even the recently renovated buildings by the Hellenic Tourism Organization are in a very bad state of preservation. At the same time, the large number of owners of each building and compound –many of whom live abroad– renders impossible any agreement for the buildings' restoration and reuse.

However, the settlement is visited by Greeks and foreigners who are interested to get acquainted with the region and who wander around the site, however difficult that may be, due to the settlement's nature as well as to its ruinous condition.

At the very opposite of this effort, a hotel complex began being built in 2011 at the entrance of Vatheia at the northern side of the traditional village. It was composed of six stone two-storied buildings, adjacent to the historic stone walls and running throughout the length of the slope. This construction alters the landscape and the image of the fortified village. A complaint has been filed for this project, and an investigation is being held as to how its construction was authorized.

The development plans which have been drafted from time to time for the area of Mani have proposed the reinforcement of the traditional agricultural economy and the promotion of mild forms of tourism, combined with the protection and promotion of its unique natural and man-made landscape⁴.

Over the last few years, private investments have taken place in the field of agricultural tourism and agricultural production, as well as municipal works for the improvement of the environment. Moreover, it has been proposed to create a «museums network» which will be housed in preserved historic buildings and will highlight the special characteristics of Mani,

³ Article by K. Papantoniou in the TCG Bulletin, 1987

⁴ Paper by Giannis Saïtas, architect and urban planner, on the subject of '*Protection and utilization of historic heritage. The experience from the activity of the public and private sector on the Mani peninsula*' presented at Kavala, at 24 & 25 -11-2006 within the context of the Forum of Entrepreneurial Support

combined with the organization of a network of cultural routes in its villages. The idea has been expressed to create a Center for the Study and Promotion of the Architectural and Cultural Heritage of Mani, aiming to become a pole of attraction for visiting researchers and scientists, offer a venue for meetings, work and hospitality, as well as technical support for the programs of local production bodies. (G. Saitas 2006)

IN LIEU of an epilogue

Mountainous villages primarily require a new financial basis to drive the reformation of their social structures. The historic and cultural interest of the villages at Mani, their unique natural environment and landscape, their historic paths, churches, monasteries, water mills, bridges, fountains, their rare aromatic plants, their special customs and the opportunities that they offer for hiking, sports and recreation, render them unique destinations for special kinds of tourism.

Mani can become a pole of attraction for the development of educational tourism, which is now one of the fastest growing activities and can considerably contribute to the sustainable development of a region with rich cultural elements. Educational tourism can include educational or research programs, so that students coming from Greece and abroad can get acquainted with the Hellenic cultural heritage.

Within the context of an educational program, students and professors of the NTUA post-graduate program «Monuments Protection» will join French students and professors from the School of Chaillot at Vatheia next month, for an in-depth acquaintance with the region and they will attempt to formulate proposals for its revival. A similar educational program took place 2 years ago at Kastania – a village at the Messinia branch of Mani.

The sustainable development of the mountainous villages of Mani, which have lost their permanent population, can only be searched through touristic economy, which must however be developed with respect to the historic environment. The networking of the villages of Mani, not only between them, but also with corresponding mountainous villages in Mediterranean countries for an exchange of experiences and good practices in this field, will yield multiple benefits.

No proposal can be materialized without an effort to find and collaborate with the residents, and to solve the difficulties rising from the proprietary status and from the ongoing ‘tradition’ of strife between the families, even to this day.

References

- ‘Preservation and Development of Traditional Settlements. The program of the National Tourism Organization (1975 - 1992)’, Edition of the National Tourism Organization (in Greek).
- ‘MANI’ by Giannis Saitas, in the volume ‘Greek Traditional Architecture, Peloponnese B’ Central Greece’, volume 5, 1987, Melissa editions.
- ‘Mani. Testimonies on its region and society. Travellers and scientific missions of the 15th-19th c.’ Conference Minutes, ed. G. Saitas, ed. KNE/NRF, Athens, 1996.
- “Restoration of Vatheia Settlement” K. Papantoniou, Technical Chamber of Greece Bulletin, 1987.