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# Perspectives on the Greek Village

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How does one define a village? How does the village—through habitation, nomenclature, or imagination—anchor people to a specific place and to a meaningful identity? How does the memory of the village bind together those in diaspora, even generations after they have abandoned their homes? How do villagers see themselves, and how are they seen by others? The five papers in this special section, addressing these questions, derive from a symposium, “The Greek Village,” held at UCLA in February 2019. The aim of the symposium was to present new research on the Greek village, from its earliest manifestations in the ancient world to its appearance in the modern day. The Greek village has been a frequent subject of interest to anthropologists, who have written extensively about rituals, kinship structures, work, gender, migration, and identity. Increasingly, the subject of the Greek village has come under the scrutiny of archaeologists and architectural historians, who have carefully traced the material remains of villages and households in order to reconstruct the lives of those who lived outside of more intensively studied cities and towns.

The symposium from which these papers derive came at a time of crisis when many were returning to the Greek village to seek renewal and authenticity. Outside the academy, the Greek village has become the setting for films and television commercials, offering the modern audience a view that is simultaneously nostalgic and troubling. The Greek submission for the best international feature category in the 92<sup>nd</sup> Academy Awards, *When Tomatoes Met Wagner*, a documentary directed by Marianna Economou (who studied anthropology, photojournalism, and film production in London), is a study of the nearly abandoned remote village of Elias in Karditsa (Thessaly), which has a population of 33 residents.<sup>1</sup> The film focuses on the attempts of a small number of villagers to save their *chorio* by producing artisanal tomato and honey products for export. The challenges to the village’s survival are best articulated by one elderly woman who says, “There is no future here. When the elderly like me die, then their children will leave. They can’t stay here. There is no life in our village. There is no life.” The film accurately captures the troubled sentiments

expressed by elderly villagers throughout Greece while at the same time honoring the efforts of younger, enterprising villagers to promote bio-agriculture, a movement that is being embraced in many small *choria* as a means of securing the future.

In recent years, representations of the village have entered popular culture and media. Television commercials in Greece—for example, “Apple Goes to Greece,” filmed in the Mani—use village settings and villagers—a *yiayia*, fisherman, priest, shepherd, etc.—as a way to connect urban Greeks—who are asked to purchase iPhones—to family, to their past, and to their essential Greekness. Others, like a series of commercials for *NOVA Greece* directed by Yorgos Lanthimos—which include a donkey-riding *yiayia*, a man who steals chickens, and a Greeklish-speaking, television-watching police officer—present stereotypes of villagers (the strong grandmother, the thief, the bumbling officer) to sell satellite TV subscriptions. A series of commercials directed by Phoivos Kontoyiannis for Kotsovolos with the tag line “I do have Black Friday in my Village,” uses the *chorio* as a mechanism to humorously illustrate the coexistence of modernity and tradition. Many of the films and commercials set in the village introduce common themes of memory, innocence, and identity.

The five essays in this special section form a critical engagement with these themes and others: the construction and imagination of villages; continuity and rupture in village history; the limits of village space and its extension beyond a physical site; the place of the village within a larger territory, empire, or state; the effects of war, economic crises, and depopulation on the village and, conversely, the impact of tourism and reconstruction; and behaviors or attitudes that characterize villagers and work to their detriment or advantage. Cultural biases against villages and villagers are addressed, yet villages and villagers are also viewed as enterprising and generative. The Greek village—as viewed by the authors in this section—is complex.

Lin Foxhall uses archaeological data to analyze several villages in the Ancient Greek countryside and to situate them within a broader, dynamic rural landscape. For Foxhall, the so-called village extends beyond the boundaries of a nucleated settlement or loosely aligned cluster of habitation into cultivated, grazing, and forest lands and engages different agents whose connections to the village and to each other are susceptible to change over time. The village is a complex site where people operate in multiple spaces. Villages are interconnected as a network of productive loci hosting a range of activities from agriculture to ceramics manufacture. Shared resources create interdependent communities. And yet, Foxhall also signals the volatility of the village, “which could change in function, change hands, or go in and out of use, quite rapidly,”

often as a result of traditions of succession and inheritance. Foxhall's work challenges traditional definitions of the village as a nucleated settlement while, at the same time, cautioning the reader about the incomplete nature of the archaeological evidence.

Sharon Gerstel looks at a single Byzantine church in a rural village in the Mani, Vamvaka, as a prism through which the village and the region's history can be viewed, from the ancient period through the modern day. Evidence from inscriptions, graffiti, wall paintings, and interviews with contemporary villagers allows the author to repopulate the village over time and reveals connections with other settlements. As the church decays—a condition that marks many ecclesiastical structures in isolated rural settings—modern villagers are fighting to raise funds to ensure its restoration, hoping that heritage tourism will produce visitors and needed financial resources. The study of the church at Vamvaka—and the value placed on the church by modern residents of the village—demonstrates that today's villagers see themselves as directly linked to those who initially built the church, even if separated by nearly one thousand years.

Michael Herzfeld, revisiting the settlement of Zoniana in the Mylopotamos district of west-central Crete, suggests that “seeing like a village” helps us to understand how village attitudes shape the views of the bureaucratic state and how they are manifested in modes of behavior that govern social relationships. The Zoniani, as he demonstrates, are astute in manipulating the state's bureaucratic apparatus, turning disadvantage to advantage. Importantly, those who see like a village (including those living in Zoniana), are able to transform themselves and to become, as Herzfeld asserts, “a source of both cultural renewal and social critique.” This ability to change means that the village is a “dynamic relationship bridging past, present, and future” and that it can provide insights into the future transformations of Greek society.

The region of Sfakia as an archetype of the Cretan village is the focus of research by Konstantinos Kalantzis, who explores what this highland setting means for locals, Greek nationals, and non-Greek visitors, and what social experiences it generates in contemporary Greece. Kalantzis's arguments are arranged around the themes of continuity/rupture and normativity. His work analyzes the expectations that Greeks and non-Greeks have for the village—architectural features common to supposedly normative picturesque villages, the presence or absence of whiskered male figures, the sale of products marked as traditional, etc. At the same time, he is interested in how Sfakians view “the village,” especially through contemporary media. Who is the audience for modern villages that are made to look old? And how does an emphasis on the

local—manifested in visual and material practices as well as in experiences—insert the village within broader discussions of the (Greek) nation?

Arguing for the role of archaeology in illuminating immigrant stories, Kostis Kourelis uses the family histories and domestic settings of three Elenis to investigate connections between villages in the Peloponnese, Epirus and Central Greece, and Greektowns in urban America. Moving beyond the Elenis, Kourelis envisions the lifeworld of Greek immigrants and argues that archaeology can be used to reconstruct the settings and stories of those who came to the United States between 1890 and 1924. Interwoven into a discussion of spaces and experiences are the evocative poems of Peter Jeffreys, interviews with Margaret Mueller, and the work of Eleni N. Gage, who rebuilt her grandmother's house in Lia, recovering furniture and belongings that had been sealed within the rubble.

Perspectives on the village offered in this section, as well as those circulating in contemporary culture, challenge us to consider the place of the *chorio* in Greek society. Viewed through both nostalgic and critical gazes, the village promises to remain a fertile subject of study.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *When Tomatoes Met Wagner* is a co-production by Anemon Productions and Stef & Lynx Productions.