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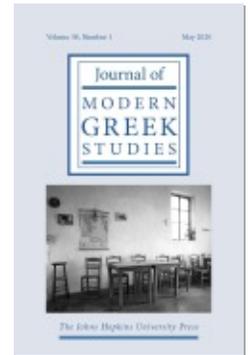
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# Recording Village History: The Church of Hagioi Theodoroi, Vamvaka, Mani

Sharon E. J. Gerstel

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## Abstract

*The church of Hagioi Theodoroi in Vamvaka, Mesa (Inner) Mani is known for a carved inscription that records the name of the medieval sculptor Niketas and the date of his work's completion in 1075. Contained within the walls, pavement, and carved elements of the church are other names, however, which capture the village's history, from the ancient through modern periods. As such, the church plays a vital role in collective memory. The story of the church does not end in the Middle Ages, however. Through ongoing efforts to restore the building, this church offers hope for the village's future. Hagioi Theodoroi is not simply a relic of the late eleventh century, but a standing witness to the village's history as a thriving agricultural center, depopulated outpost, and potential tourist destination.*

Hagioi Theodoroi is one of twelve churches, the majority of them Byzantine, found in the small village of Vamvaka in the Mesa (Inner) Mani (Figure 1) (Kassis 1990, 370).<sup>1</sup> Of these, it is the only medieval church that is not in ruins or rebuilt with modern walls.<sup>2</sup> The domed structure is sited on the main road of the village at a high point above the dwellings. Continuing above the church to the east, the road leads high into the hills where the villagers once had summer fields and *kalyvia*, seasonal dwellings. As the local priest observed about its location, “Hagioi Theodoroi is the crown of the village. It is close to the mountain where people took their animals and from which people were nourished.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, many of the threshing floors in the upper part of the village are in fields close to the church. The building was once surrounded by cisterns, features commonly associated with churches in the arid Mani; these are now obscured by rubble and plant growth.<sup>4</sup> Well known for its dated inscription naming the prolific medieval sculptor Niketas, Hagioi Theodoroi draws tourists to the village. Yet woven into the church's fabric are names associated with the village's unwritten



Figure 1. Church of Hagioi Theodoroi, Vamvaka, Mani. (S. Gerstel)

history, names that are no longer read or remembered. The issues that surround the study of humble buildings like this one are universal—how churches serve as containers of memory, how they participate in intersecting liturgical and agricultural calendars, how they accommodate life cycle rituals, and how the buildings, both epigraphically and acoustically, record and shape words and sounds (Hart 1992; Gerstel 2015). Through the agency of the church, human time is transcended. The present is linked to the past, and generations of the faithful, both living and dead, are collected in common and eternal prayer. Indeed, for modern villagers, transtemporal connections are embedded in narratives about the church, whether referring to its construction (“The church was built by older generations. They carried the rocks on their back to build the church.”) or to its emotional value (“It has come down to us from our grandfathers, our fathers. We have been living with it, and our children are also living with it, and our grandchildren live with it as well.”).<sup>5</sup> Within small villages, and in the absence of preserved land registers, churches like Hagioi Theodoroi serve as archives of village memory, recalling those buried in close proximity, honoring those who offered financial assistance for construction or renovation, identifying the clergymen who served, recording significant events, and welcoming those who cross its threshold in faith.

In the Mani, dozens of churches like Hagioi Theodoroi are today in ruins. Their rapid decay offers a challenge to an office of the archaeological service that is already taxed. At the same time the restoration of monuments of historic importance and aesthetic value like Hagioi Theodoroi offers hope for the sustainability of small agrarian villages in the region, which has suffered from economic depression and depopulation (Lineton 1971, 276–312; Komis 2005, 385–386).<sup>6</sup> The few permanent villagers understand the importance of their church, which contains the first dated inscription of a famous medieval sculptor. They think about heritage tourism (Bonet 2013, 386–401; Salazar and Zhu 2015, 240–258), which, in their opinion, has the potential of increasing income and growing the population. Indeed, those who live in Vamvaka are well aware of other churches that have been restored in the region, and the benefits that restoration holds for assembling communities for church festivals, baptisms, marriages, etc.<sup>7</sup> In this article, I describe Hagioi Theodoroi as a historical marker, and discuss recent efforts initiated by the villagers to restore the church. Their efforts manifest their close connection to the building and its critical role in establishing village identity (Smith 2006, 74–77).

Like all churches in the Mani, Hagioi Theodoroi is built of stone—some freshly quarried for the construction and some repurposed from other sites (Traquair 1908/1909, 183–185; Megaw 1932/1933, 139–145; Drandakis 1998, 281–284). Stone has special resonance for the people who live on this rocky peninsula—it is the material of houses, churches, graves, cisterns, and all other built features. In this arid region, stone is the material of life. Within this church and others in the Mani, stone yields to nature as it is carved into the forms of plants and animals that embellish the building.<sup>8</sup> Sadly, in Hagioi Theodoroi, stone also nourishes life as plants now penetrate the mortar, reclaiming the interior of the church and covering the medieval paintings with a thin mantle of woven roots.

The dedication of the church is significant in the Mani, and speaks to individual and community connections. Theodore the General and Theodore the Recruit were powerful warrior saints and the frequency with which they are honored in the region is linked by many residents to the bellicose character of the Mani's inhabitants, those residents of an unconquered land who have always been known for their military valor. Theodore is a common name in this remote setting, a region where male infants are called *opla* or *doufekia* (guns). Traces of at least one of the Theodoroi, or at least the head of the horse on which he once rode, can still be seen on the north wall of the church, even though it is largely obscured by a thick layer of whitewash.



Figure 2. View from Church of Hagioi Theodoroi, Vamvaka, Mani to Tigani. (S. Gerstel)

In the medieval Mani, as elsewhere in the Byzantine Empire, the frequent dedication of churches to military saints also signals their summoning in times of political and military strife (Gerstel 2001, 263–273). Dedications to George, Demetrios, and the two Theodores are common, as is their representation in ecclesiastical decoration. Medieval churches dedicated to St. Theodore or the two Theodores are found in Ano Poula, Kaphiona, Diros,<sup>9</sup> and Tsopakas, in addition to Vamvaka. The siting of Hagioi Theodoroi at a high point in the village suggests that the builders were aware of the saints' strategic powers. Indeed, the church's clear view of Tigani—the region's medieval administrative and military center—locates Hagioi Theodoroi within a network of monuments (and villages) that could communicate with each other at times of danger (Figure 2).

The dedication to the Theodoroi holds another meaning, however, which is also revealed by the church's location. Turning south in front of the church, the road narrows and terminates at the current village cemetery. A dirt road leads beyond this to the older cemetery, which is long abandoned. According to residents of Vamvaka, Hagioi Theodoroi served as the funeral church of the village. Some even remember the existence of graves around the building, although these are no longer visible.<sup>10</sup> Hagioi Theodoroi and the newer cemetery, with its long rows of low, stone tombs and larger family ossuaries, were and are

ritually linked through rites of burial: the deceased, blessed in the church, was carried along the narrow road to the cemetery, accompanied by mourners.<sup>11</sup> St. Theodore the Recruit is also associated with the remembrance of the dead through his evocation on the third Saturday of the Souls. The service recalls a miracle in which the military saint protected the population from the consumption of tainted food, urging them, instead, to eat boiled wheat, *kollyva*, the dish traditionally offered for the benefit of the departed (Mary and Ware 1978, 281).

The dedication of the church thus proclaims its centrality to the community of the living, but also to that of the dead. It involves the saint in issues of security through the evocation of holy protection, and it binds those baptized in the name of Theodore—and their families—to the saints. In 2017, the church was the site of a baptism, the first to be held in the church for decades.<sup>12</sup> Of the family members who were present, the father of the child was a Theodore and the godfather the son of a Theodore. The child's great aunt, Metaxia, was tightly bound to the saints by a vow.<sup>13</sup> The names of these contemporary villagers are woven into the modern life of Hagioi Theodoroi, but their names extend backwards through their repetition within families and through sustained connections between this church and its adjacent cemetery, the annual celebration of the Saturday of the Souls, and life cycle rituals like baptisms and funerals. The church is also located in close proximity to the ancestral tower houses of prominent village families, including the Anapliotis and the Panteleakis. For these families, the church was an intermediate station between their houses and the cemetery, a path that was taken frequently as relatives visited the graves of the deceased to light lamps and offer prayers.

### *An ancient community*

Hagioi Theodoroi has also absorbed the names of those ancients who once walked across the same landscape—those who join the medieval and modern residents of Vamvaka through their eternal commemoration on the walls of the church. Here, the recording of names on stone and in paint brings the layered history of the community into focus, creating, in the words of the architectural historian Amy Papalexandrou, “a locus of meaningful dialogue and movement—a place where events happen and people communicate on a multiplicity of levels” (Papalexandrou 2001, 238). In this church and in several others in the Mani, stone and paint are in dialogue, as names of local villagers—ancient, medieval, and modern—form part of an archive whose records are prominently displayed on interior and exterior walls. Rather than memorializing the names of elite members of society, inscriptions in the Mani preserve the names of



Figure 3. Church of Hagioi Theodoroi, Vamvaka, Mani. Epitaph on west side of church carved with the names Diophantos, Auge, and Epiteuxis. (S. Gerstel)

local, humble community members who have remained largely invisible. The publication of the preserved names, therefore, introduces an entire population into the scholarly record, contextualizing those named in their own temporal and physical surroundings and in the times and places that would follow. The inscriptions at Vamvaka also witness connections across villages—both along the mountain road and across the valley—that shared resources and family ties.

On the exterior of the Vamvaka church, prominently placed adjacent to the entrance, a Greek epitaph of the second century AD, immured upside down, proclaims: Διόφαντε χαίρε | Αὐγή χαίρε | Ἐπίτευξι χαίρε [- - -]διο (Figure 3) (*IG V,1* 1287; *SEG* 60 372). The names, Diophantos, Auge, and Epiteuxis, written in large (4 cm high), deeply carved letters, are each followed by the word *χαίρε*, hail or farewell.<sup>14</sup> Read against the illuminated façade, the inscription draws the modern viewer into the past, whether they can decipher the inscription or not.<sup>15</sup> The names of the three deceased individuals supplement those recited within the walls of the church in the diptychs of the living and the dead, those remembered on the Saturday of Souls, and those recalled in the nearby cemetery through commemorative prayer. The careful display on the church façade—adjacent to the portal—signals the importance of words that were—across generations and for different reasons—meaningful.<sup>16</sup>

In the incorporation of a re-used epitaph into its wall fabric, the church of Hagioi Theodoroi is not unique in the Mani, nor indeed in the surrounding villages. At the church of the Panagia, found in the small enclave of Nakia at the northern edge of Vamvaka, two large dressed stones form the lintel of the sanctuary portal and the adjacent section of the masonry iconostasis. The blocks are inscribed with crudely carved letters, likely post-Classical,<sup>17</sup> which read: ΔΥΣΤΙΧΑ ΧΑΙΡΕ | ΕΤΩΝ ΔΕΚΑΤΡΙΩΝ | ΔΙΟΓΕΝΗ ΧΑΙΡΕ | ΕΤΩΝ ΜΗ΄ | ΚΑΛΛΙΚΡΑΤΗ ΚΑΜΑΡΙΟΝ ΧΑΙΡΕΤΕ (Δύστιχα χαίρε ἔτων δεκατριῶν · Διογένη χαίρε ἔτων μη΄ · Καλλικράτη Καμάριον χαίρετε: Kassis 1990, 370). The recording of the ages of the deceased, 13 and 48, provides a poignancy to the text, which crowns the location where prayers of commemoration would have been offered. Related to these inscriptions is a third with nearly identical letter forms to those at Hagioi Theodoroi, also dated to the first or second century AD (Drandakis 1977, 225). Immured in the north wall of the church of the Taxiarches in the neighboring village of Kouloumi, the stone epitaph is placed in the correct orientation and displays the words Ἐρατῶ χαίρε (Woodward 1906/1907, 259; *IG* V,1 1528; *SEG* 30 401). The inscriptions in Vamvaka and Kouloumi, which are taken from the same ancient cemetery, likely in Kouloumi (Woodward 1906/1907, 241–242), ties the communities to each other and to a collective past. Indeed, the two villages, one on the hillside and one in the valley immediately below, are connected by a road. The diminutive church of St. Panteleimon, now in ruins, stands between the two villages, marking the crossing of the Vamvaka-Kouloumi road and the main north-south thoroughfare.

The ancient inscription on the west façade is counterbalanced by a fragment from a marble tomb monument or ossuary container immured in the east wall adjacent to the apse (Figure 4). Here, too, the builders selected an ancient fragment whose decoration—like the display of the word χαίρε on the opposite wall of the church—would resonate with medieval viewers. The marble relief (H 0.30 cm × W 0.27 cm) is carved with a portal flanked by two Ionic columns (Waelkens 1986). The horizontal and vertical beams that divide the portal into four panels appear as a cross.

Hagioi Theodoroi houses yet another ancient name covered up until recently and, as far as I know, unpublished.<sup>18</sup> The name is inscribed on a small Hellenistic stele of the late third or early second century BC, which was carefully trimmed and incorporated into the marble pavement near the threshold of the sanctuary (Figure 5).<sup>19</sup> The text records the name Philodamos (Φιλόδαμῆ), and ends again with the word χαίρε, farewell. In its shape and size, the stele is remarkably similar to one from the same period that was discovered in excavations in the church of St. Peter in Palaiochora, a small village adjacent



Figure 4 (above). Church of Hagioi Theodoroi, Vamvaka, Mani. Fragment of ancient marble tomb monument or ossuary container on east side of church. (S. Gerstel)

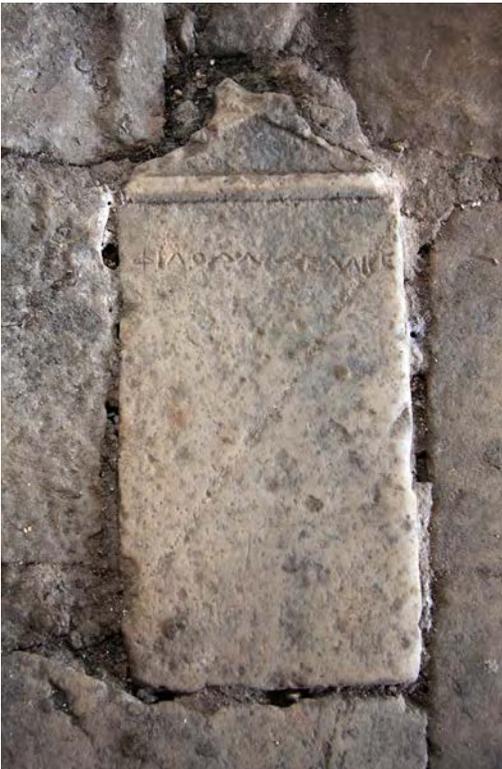


Figure 5 (left). Church of Hagioi Theodoroi, Vamvaka, Mani. Hellenistic stele naming Philódamos in the church pavement. (S. Gerstel)

to Vamvaka. The inscription on the Palaiochora stele, partially preserved, reads: ..ΑΑΙΑ ΧΑΙΠΕ (Drandakis 1975, 187).<sup>20</sup> Similar to the Vamvaka plaque, the Palaiochora stele has a projecting pediment that has a central acroterion decorated with a palmette. In order to fit the stele into the Vamvaka church pavement, the acroterion was chiseled off. The careful positioning of the texts—visible across time—and the marble plaque with a cross united ancient, medieval, and modern communities in a shared language of salutation and commemoration. The inscriptions also provide evidence for ties across village boundaries. In the Middle Ages, those who gathered the stone for the church had ties to both Kouloumi and Palaiochora. The close connection between these neighboring villages has continued until recent times as witnessed by the marriages contracted between families.

### *A medieval community*

Inscriptions in the Vamvaka church also capture other generations that passed through the village. These generations are closer in time and united by faith—the generations that gathered the stone to build the church and also left their names to be remembered. Above the main portal, supporting a recessed arch that would have once framed a painting of the church's titular saints, is a limestone beam carved with peacocks flanking a foliate cross (Figure 6). With its beak, one of the birds grasps a cluster of grapes that emerges from the leaves at the base of the cross. The grapes and peacocks, through symbolic interpretation, are linked to the eucharist and salvation, a link that would have been easily grasped by the faithful who were skilled in decoding imagery. On the left side of this composition is an inscription written in four lines, today cracked by the weight of the belfry, which was rebuilt in the early twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> The text reads: +Μνήσθητη Κ(ύρι)ε τον σο δούλο Θεοδώρου Πρ(εσβυτέρου) κ(αί) Καλῆς του κτησαμένου την άγηαν μονήν τ[αύ]τη (Remember, Lord, your servant Theodore the priest and [his wife] Kale, the builders of this holy monastery) (Traquair 1908/1909, 184; Drandakis 1972, 29–30; Drandakis 2002, 10–11). Located on the same wall as the ancient funerary inscription, this text provides us with another set of names to associate with the building. The name of the priest, Theodore, forms an additional connection—through name and profession—between the saint and an individual, and then between the individual and the Theodores who still pray in the church.

This connection between the past and present was clearly manifested during a service held in the building in 2017. As part of a collaborative project to film a short documentary about Hagioi Theodoroí,<sup>22</sup> the village priest, Father



Figure 6. Church of Hagioi Theodoroi, Vamvaka, Mani. West portal with inscription naming Theodore the priest and his wife, Kale. (S. Gerstel)

Nikolaos Lambrinakos, was invited to celebrate a short liturgy in the church, the first Trisagion to be held in many years. Before the service began, I took the priest around the church and read with him the medieval texts inscribed on the lintel and a tie beam inside the building. In his prayers during the service, Father Nikos spontaneously asked the Lord to grant salvation and the remission of sins to “Theodore the priest, *my brother and concelebrant*, Kalliope, his wife, and Niketas (the marble sculptor).” Through the practice of transtemporal concelebration, time collapsed as a contemporary priest ritually engaged with a priest who had died almost a millennium earlier. In his prayer, Father Nikos called the priest’s wife by the name Kalliope, even though she is recorded in the inscription as Kale, a common name for medieval women in the region (Drandakis 2002, 11; Gerstel 2015, 82). Kalliope is a popular modern name in the Mani, and in changing the name slightly, Father Nikos introduced the medieval presbytera into contemporary society. Two years after the Trisagion, the priest was still evoking the name of his medieval concelebrant. In conversations in October 2019, Father Nikos repeatedly referred to Theodore the priest, stating that “he was drawn to the church because of this connection.”<sup>23</sup>

Inscriptions over the portals of churches in this region help us to repopulate villages and reimagine communities of the past. They inform us about



Figure 7. Church of Hagioi Theodoroi, Vamvaka, Mani. Western tie beam with detail of inscription naming the Niketas, the marble sculptor, and providing the date of August 1075. (S. Gerstel)

the roles that these small structures played in the lives of those who built them, entered them, and prayed within them. They tell us about the motivation of church patrons for undertaking such constructions and their reasons for venerating specific saints. These inscriptions are the manifestations of vows made, marking the church exterior with the words of prayers and making permanent requests for assistance. An extraordinarily large number of such inscriptions survives in the region, carved onto the exterior of buildings like Vamvaka and even painted on their interior, as seen in well-known inscriptions in Polemitas, Karynia, Koita, and elsewhere (Drandakis 1982, 44–61; Kalopissi-Verti 1992, 71–75; Gerstel 2015, 27, 119, and 129; Katsafados 2015, 25–37 and 54–87).

On occasion, inscriptions inside the church do more than manifest the votive wishes of the faithful. The third name recalled in prayer by Father Nikos was that of Niketas, the marble sculptor who carved the architectural decoration in Hagioi Theodoroi and many other churches in the Mani. Niketas's traces can be found in inscriptions that bear his name and in his distinctive style of carving (Drandakis 1972; Drandakis 1975/1976; Vanderheyde 1998, 766–769). According to an inscription carved into the western marble tie beam, Hagioi Theodoroi was dedicated in August 1075 (Figure 7) (Traquair 1908/1909, 183; Drandakis 1972, 24–25; Feissel and Philippidis-Braat 1985, 305; Drandakis

2002, 3). The inscription is best read by a literate viewer—the priest—standing at the threshold of the sanctuary. In the adjacent village of Vriki, in the ruined church of St. George, a carved inscription names Νηκήτα(ς) μαρμαράς δούλο(ς) Χ(ριστο)ῦ (Niketas the marble sculptor, the servant of Christ) (Drandakis 1972, 23; Drandakis 2002, 21; Pallis 2012, 793). Another inscription naming the sculptor is found on the exterior of the church of the Holy Trinity in the same village (Drandakis 1972, 34; Drandakis 2002, 24–25). Vamvaka and Vriki, two of five villages known in Greek as the Πεντάδα,<sup>24</sup> are connected by a narrow road, the very path traveled by the marble sculptor to fulfill his commissions. Like the inscription on the exterior of the Vamvaka church, the inscription on the tie beam begins with the word “remember,” linking the text overhead, in terms of the process of memory, to the one above the portal. It, too, begins with a cross, fusing somatic movement and vocalized prayer. Here, the Lord is asked to “remember thy servant Leo and his wife and children.” The text thus adds yet another set of names to those already connected to the building by faith. Continuing, the Vamvaka text praises Leo for “his great devotion, which provided these sculpted embellishments” and then instructs: ἡ ψάλοντες εὐχεσθε ἡπὲρ αὐτοῦ (chanters, pray for him) (Drandakis 1975/1976, 22; Drandakis 2002, 3). At the end of the inscription, Niketas identifies himself as the marble sculptor—the *marmaras*—who carried out the work by hand. The request to the chanters is found in other churches in the Mani associated with Niketas, including Hagioi Theodoroi in Kaphiona, another church dedicated to the military saints. Here, the inscription is found on a rectangular beam that today forms the crowning of the sanctuary’s north closure slab: Μ(νήσ)θη(τι) Κ(ύρι)ε τοῦ δούλου σου Νι(κή)τ(α) μαρμαρά· ἡ ψάλοντες εὐχεσθε αὐτοῦ (Remember, Lord, your servant, Niketas the marble sculptor. Chanters, pray for him.) (Drandakis 1972, 33; Drandakis 2002, 27; Pallis 2012, 793). The letters, crudely chiseled into the flat leaves that decorate the beam, run up and down like notes on an imaginary staff, conjuring for the modern viewer sounds now silent. These texts record for us the voices of the population whose bones are now found in the surrounding grounds. Thus, when Father Nikos added his voice to that of an eleventh-century priest, he was, in fact, following instructions that had been carved above his head, fulfilling a mandate left by the hand of a medieval sculptor. Like the ancient inscriptions, which reveal ties to the neighboring villages of Kouloumi and Palaiochora, the medieval inscriptions forge other connections, particularly along the mountainside road that links Vamvaka and Vriki. Kaphiona is the village adjacent to Kouloumi, extending the work of the sculptor across the main thoroughfare.

*An endangered community*

While the interior of the church at Vamvaka was originally painted with images of saints, narrative scenes from the life of Christ, and dogmatic images concerned with the Incarnation and Resurrection, they are now covered by whitewash. The church has at least three layers of paint, a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century layer, to which the equestrian figure of Saint Theodore belongs, and an earlier layer that is no longer visible. In the apse of the church are post-Byzantine paintings. Scratched into the north wall of the church, above and between the faded image of the equestrian saints, are graffiti that record later events that concerned the church and its community. Of paramount importance is an unpublished graffito which reads: ετους ,ζμστ εκουρσεψας(ι) η τουρκη τι μανι (ἔτους ,ζμστ' ἐκουρσέψασι οἱ Τούρκοι τη Μάνη; In the year 7046 [=1537/1538], the Turks plundered the Mani).<sup>25</sup> The text provides critical information about incursions into the Mani at the time of the third Ottoman-Venetian War (1537–1540). In the year 1537, the Ottoman admiral Barbarossa Hayreddin Pasha sacked Ayios Demetrios (Palaiochora), the capital city of the island of Kythera, located close to the southern tip of the Mani, and carried off numerous hostages. Residents of the Mani quickly learned about the Turkish threat to Kythera and about the ensuing siege of the island (Tsiknakis 2018, 223). Indeed, according to a Venetian report of 1563, refugees from Kythera had found their way *al braccio della Maina* (to the arm of Maina) following the stunning defeat (Tsitsilias 1993, 274; Gregory 2008, 262–263). The residents of Vamvaka were well aware of the Ottoman threat even before the siege of Kythera. The stronghold of Koroni, located across the Bay of Messenia, had surrendered to the Turks on 1 April 1534 (Setton 1984, 392). The long siege of Koroni began as a naval battle and the Maniots surely would have seen the threatening Turkish galleys on the horizon. At such times, the villagers invoked the protection of the military saints, whose power rested in the large number of churches that punctuated the landscape, and relied on their military prowess.

Close to this graffito is a second one naming (πα)πα βασιλίου (Papa Vasilios), a sixteenth-century priest whose name can now be added to the list of clergymen who served in Hagioi Theodoroi—Theodore, Vasilios, and, most recently, Father Nikos. Of interest is the location of the graffiti, which are incised between the painted representations of the titular saints. Graffiti of 1614 found in the nearby Monastery of the Virgin Phaneromeni are also incised into the paintings of the two Theodores.<sup>26</sup> These slightly later graffiti also record conditions in the Mani, notably drought and famine.

Hagioi Theodoroi at Vamvaka is a humble structure, yet it exemplifies how village churches served as “monumental stone archives” (Papalexandrou 2013, 53)—enshrining within their very fabric the names and memories of those who lived and were buried in close proximity. It was built in 1075, but it gathers generations from the millennia before and after. Like so many churches in the Mani, it navigates between the living and the dead. It is painted, but whitewashed; solid, but eroding. It is the church of a village, but also the church of an empire. It records for us sound and also captures emotions—lamentation over the deceased, fear of invasion, etc. It is one of dozens of standing churches in the Mani that tell the stories of priests, mothers, farmers, children, painters, and sculptors whose names are known but have never been part of a written history. And yet, because of the importance of its inscriptions, its fixed date, and its association with a known marble-worker, Hagioi Theodoroi is one of the best known medieval churches in the Mani. It is included in books on Byzantine architecture as an exemplary structure (Ousterhout 2019, 426–427), but its story has yet to be fully told. Like many churches in the Mani, the church is viewed by the community as a part of an unbroken link to the past, a past that is seen as continuous.<sup>27</sup>

### *A new chapter*

Like many churches in the Mani, Hagioi Theodoroi also participates in the lives of contemporary villagers who value its heritage, but are frustrated by its decaying condition. In June 2016, I attempted three times to enter the church, only to find it locked. By accident, I met a local councilman, Stamatis Panteleakis and his wife, Kyriake, who related their concerns about the church’s condition. They urged me to have a look at the church, and they arranged for its caretaker, Metaxia Anaplioti, to meet me with the key. Metaxia, too, was anxious about the condition of the church, since a thick crack ran through the south wall and a tree was growing out of it. Plants had rooted in the masonry of the roof, the walls, and the foundations. Many of the eleventh-century glazed bowls that had once decorated the church exterior had been broken or pried from the masonry. Wasps had built nests against the marble lintel of the western portal, obscuring the inscription. Because of damage to the vault, rain was penetrating the structure and icons had been covered with plastic in order to protect them from damage. Roots had descended into the church. Shortly after my visit to the building, the director of the local office of the Ministry of Culture contacted me and asked me to help raise funds to restore the building.

A nonprofit organization has now been incorporated for this purpose: The Byzantine Church Preservation Foundation, Inc.<sup>28</sup>

Those who live in Vamvaka and the surrounding villages have strong feelings about the importance of the church, both as a heritage site and as a center of Orthodox rites. Eirene Panteleaki Exarchakou, who grew up in the village before moving to Glezou as a bride, remembers that until 1950 the church was used for funeral rites. When she was a child she was taken to services in the church. “They were all sad services,” she observed. “They did not have coffins then, so they laid the deceased onto planks of wood. And, if the dead person was young, there was a great lament, and the women would tear their hair. And they would carry the deceased in their arms and then to the cemetery. The whole village went to the church . . . and then followed the procession to the cemetery.”<sup>29</sup> Manolis Tsigkakos remembers the epitaphios procession stopping outside the church on Holy Friday, “where there were women gathered with candles.”<sup>30</sup> Stamatis Panteleakis, who climbed up the outside of the church to ring the bell in his youth, remembers christenings and funeral services when he was around the age of ten. When he was around fifteen, he asserts, the liturgies stopped and the church was abandoned. He knows the land around the church intimately, and can point out the remains of cisterns and discuss property ownership. He remembers that the interior was once decorated, but that “someone went in and painted over the saints,” an observation that was repeated by many of the villagers.<sup>31</sup>

How did such an important church fall into such a perilous state? According to villagers, the abandonment of the church was hastened by a change of priest in the 1950s. The new priest, Father Konstantinos Kyriakoulakos from the neighboring village of Mina, favored the recently built church of the Panagia in the lower part of the village. As one resident commented, “The priest was not interested in using Hagioi Theodoroi.”<sup>32</sup>

An event that took place in the early 1980s also contributed to the church’s abandonment. Nearly every older person in Vamvaka, and even those outside the village, remember a robbery that took place within the building. Michalis Exarchakos remembers his father telling him that robbers—foreigners—had dug inside the church and stolen fragments of sculpture. Yet another villager recalls that the robber—a German from Skoutari—ran out of the church so quickly “that he left his pickaxe and shovel behind. I still have them!”<sup>33</sup> The marble fragments were replaced in the pavement of the narthex “as best we could,” but the resulting pavement continues to be extremely unstable (Figure 8). The story is related with great excitement by the villagers, who were proud of



Figure 8. Church of Hagioi Theodoroi, Vamvaka. Pavement of narthex as restored following robbery. (S. Gerstel).

thwarting the robber, who was eventually captured by the police. The emphasis on the robber's foreign origins plays well in the village, where value is placed on those with blood ties to the region.

Care of the church fell to Metaxia Anaplioti, whose close connection to the saints ensured that she entered the building daily to light a candle. Her family's tower house is in close proximity to the church and, undoubtedly, she felt a connection to the building, which was located in her neighborhood. Occasionally, tourists were able to enter Hagioi Theodoroi, but accessibility in recent years was dependent on Metaxia's schedule. Many left the village without entering the church. Since her untimely death in February 2018, the church has remained locked.

Father Nikos's flock is the community of faithful that is connected through memory to those who built the church and those whose names are inscribed on and in it. The residents of Vamvaka acknowledge the importance of St. Theodore since every family in the village has a member who shares his name—the Anapliotis, the Panteleakis, the Koukakis, the Iasakos, etc.<sup>34</sup> The villagers frequently mention the generations gathered in the church, and they feel a kinship to those whose names are inscribed on the façade and in the interior. When human bones were uncovered outside the church in the course of excavation in October 2019,

Father Nikos offered to say a Trisagion for the deceased and asked to place the bones in his family ossuary, stating, “they are one of us.”<sup>35</sup> The church ties the villagers to their past, but also to their future, which they link to the restoration of the building and the surrounding land. While the property surrounding the church used to be leveled by a thick retaining wall, land erosion following the removal of stones caused the earth to wash down the hill, leaving the foundations of the church exposed and vulnerable. The large stones from the wall have been rolled against the exterior of the church to bolster the structure, which is now pierced by large cracks. In the words of one villager, restoration of the plaza surrounding the church would encourage people to return to the building for “baptisms, weddings, and memorial services. It would attract people from all over Mani and even from beyond.”<sup>36</sup> Another resident of Vamvaka observed, “if the church is fixed, it will give greater importance to the village.”<sup>37</sup>

The long view of the church of Hagioi Theodoroi provides a wealth of information about the history of a village for which there are few written accounts. Bringing together the names of the past and the voices of the present allows us to consider how a community grew up around the church. Its preservation until this day affirms the church’s value to the community—those who once repaired its walls and rebuilt its belfry, and those who trim the tree growing from its side and light candles in remembrance. It is a monument rooted in loss, marked by the tombstones of the ancients, and linked to the adjacent graveyard by rite and proximity. The inscriptions, both ancient and medieval, are dominated by two words—*farewell* and *remember*. It is the second word, *remember*, that compels modern villagers to seek funds for the church’s restoration. Only then will the church reassemble the community of Vamvaka—those of the past, those of the present, and those of the future.

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#### NOTES

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present this material. I am very grateful to the anonymous readers for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article. The inscriptions from the Vamvaka church—and others in the Mani—are reproduced here with their medieval spelling.

<sup>1</sup> I thank Michalis Exarchakos for sharing with me pages from his unpublished monograph, which contains information about the churches in Vamvaka. The Koimesis of the Theotokos, built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, now serves as the main church of the village.

<sup>2</sup> The church of St. Paraskeve was rebuilt by the Panteleakis family, who incorporated the older walls of the sanctuary into the new structure. The church of St. Nicholas was also rebuilt on the foundations of an older church.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Father Nikolaos Lambrinakos, 17 October 2019.

<sup>4</sup> I thank Stamatis Panteleakis for discussing the cisterns around the church with me on site in June 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews with the few remaining residents of the village were conducted by the author from 2016–2020 as part of a larger project to study the building. Interviews, recorded or transcribed on site, have been used in this article with the permission of the subjects.

<sup>6</sup> According to the census of 1844, the village had 237 habitants. By 1879, the population had increased to 357. By the mid- twentieth century, the population had begun to decrease rapidly. The census of 1961 records 86 residents, while only 56 are recorded in the 1981 census. The census of 2011 lists only 32 residents. There are fewer permanent residents today.

<sup>7</sup> One villager, Manolis Tsigkakos, highlighted the successful restoration of the church of St. Barbara in the nearby village of Erimos, which has now become a gathering point for services and celebrations.

<sup>8</sup> Stone beams over the entrance to the church and sanctuary present peacocks and a griffin in relief carving.

<sup>9</sup> The church is now dedicated to St. Paraskeve.

<sup>10</sup> Human bones were discovered adjacent to the south wall of the church in the course of archaeological soundings by the Ephoreia of Lakonia in October 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Eirene Panteleaki Exarchakou, 28 June 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Because of the instability of the structure, the rite was held outside the church under the shade of a lone olive tree.

<sup>13</sup> Metaxia's vow is the subject of the film *Blessings and Vows* (2018).

<sup>14</sup> I thank Angelos Chaniotes for discussing the date of this inscription with me. Analysis of the writing reveals that the names were written at different times, beginning with Diophantos.

<sup>15</sup> See the comments by Henry Post, who visited the church in 1827 and viewed its exterior inscriptions (Post 1830, 103).

<sup>16</sup> The placement of the inscription upside down may indicate that the workers who initially installed the stone were unable to read it. Given its location—next to the portal and at eye level—there is no doubt that the community valued the words. Even today, the inscription is easily legible.

<sup>17</sup> As with the inscription on the west wall of Hagioi Theodoroi, the three names appear to have been written at different times. It is likely that these inscriptions were covered with painted plaster.

<sup>18</sup> The inscription was uncovered in June 2017 when I cleaned the church in preparation for the baptism.

<sup>19</sup> While it is possible that the stele signals a later repair to the pavement, its careful placement and color matching suggests that it may belong to the original construction.

<sup>20</sup> Drandakis suggests that the name should be restored as ΑΓΛΑΙΑ. The stele is stored in the Pikoulakis Tower Museum in Areopolis.

<sup>21</sup> According to Stamatis Panteleakis, the belfry was rebuilt by his uncle Nikos (interview in June 2019).

<sup>22</sup> As part of the project to raise funds for the church, I invited Professor Katerina Zacharia (Loyola Marymount University) to collaborate on the creation of a film about the church and the residents of Vamvaka. The ensuing film, *Blessings and Vows*, which was directed by Zacharia and for which I served as Executive Producer, views the church of Hagioi Theodoroi through the eyes of a single village woman (Metaxia Anaplioti), but also includes selective interviews with village residents and members of the archaeological service. Claire Andreae, the film's cinematographer, captured stunning views of the church and the interviewed subjects. A Faculty Research Grant from UCLA and funds from LMU underwrote the costs of the film project. I thank Demetrios and Erin Panteleakis for generously hosting the film team for the five days of shooting in Vamvaka. I also thank UCLA Dean of Humanities David Schaberg for his assistance in seeing the project to its completion.

<sup>23</sup> Interview on 18 October 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Dryalos, Palaiochora, Vamvaka, Vriki, and Mina.

<sup>25</sup> I am extremely grateful to Panayotis Katsafados for reading the graffiti. Final analysis of the graffiti will have to wait until the paintings have been cleaned.

<sup>26</sup> The graffiti in this church have been studied by Panayotis Katsafados, who has posted an analysis on academia.edu under the title «Μια γραπτή μαρτυρία του 1614 από τη μονή της Φανερωμένης, Μέσα Μάνης» (A Written Testimony of 1614 from the Phaneromeni Monastery, Inner Mani).

<sup>27</sup> In the course of my years of fieldwork in the Mani, the notion of a continuous, unbroken past has been repeatedly articulated by villagers. This idea bolsters the regional view of the Mani as an unconquered land.

<sup>28</sup> The nonprofit corporation, incorporated in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in April 2019, is directed by Demetrios Panteleakis, a Greek-American from Vamvaka.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Eirene Panteleaki Exarchakou, 28 June 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Manolis Tsigkakos, 7 January 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Interviews with Stamatis Panteleakis, 18 June 2019, with Metaxia Anaplioti, 25 June 2017, and with Eirene Panteleaki Exarchakou, 28 June 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Suggestions that the church may have ceased functioning because of the Greek Civil War are not borne out by the testimonies of the Vamvaka residents.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Stamatis Panteleakis, 17 October 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Kyriaki Barbayanni Panteleaki, 25 June 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Commentary by Father Nikolaos Lambrinakos, 18 October 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Stamatis Panteleakis, 18 October 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Maria Tsigkakou, 7 January 2020.

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