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1.4 Cultural forces in the creation of landscapes of south-eastern Rhodope: Evolution of the Byzantine monastic landscape

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Abstract

Cultural landscapes constitute the cultural, social, ecological and economical heritage of the local population. The mountainous area of South-eastern Rhodope, from the Byzantine times till the 1970s, includes a complicated palimpsest characterised by multiplicity and density of natural and cultural elements. The purpose of this paper is the research, identification and evaluation of the cultural landscape of the area of Mt Papikion in south-eastern Rhodope. Information and data were collected and analysed. The consecutive producers of landscape, with different cultural identities, acted within a historical and ecological outline. The monks and later the Pomaks (part of the Muslim minority in Greece as recognised by the Lausanne Treaty in 1923) preserved the basic landscape’s structures, while adapting them to their cultural reality. The ruins located in the area indicate the existence of a renowned centre of Byzantine monasticism which is mentioned in the ancient sources from as early as the 11th century.

Since the 1970s, new stakeholders and social changes have had their impact on the landscape, and modern methods of landscape management have replaced the traditional practices. Although it is recognised that traditional knowledge can contribute to sustainable resource use in general (Schmink et al. 1992), modern management rarely takes it into account. Due to extensive afforestations and to the loss of traditional practices of woodland management, the landscape has become more homogenised. Historical, demographic, social, natural and economic changes affect the evolution of the landscape, so it should be mapped, registered and evaluated before its complete disappearance. The cultural landscape of the area is a significant source of knowledge of the traditional environmental know-how.
KEYWORDS

cultural landscape, Byzantium, monasticism, Pomaks

INTRODUCTION

The region of the Papikion Mountain in Rhodope has a variety of traditional landscapes. It was first inhabited by hermits and the communal monastic system was introduced later. During the 11th century AD monks began developing a monastic centre, adopting techniques to shape the landscape according to their needs. After the 13th century, monasteries began to decline, mostly due to fires. During post-Byzantine times, Papikion was no longer considered to be a monastic centre. However, close to the ruins of the monasteries the Islamised residents of the uplands of Rhodope, the Pomaks, built small settlements in order to exploit the arable land around them. The Pomaks are one of the few remaining traditional societies in Greece (Dalègre 1997). They are part of the Muslim minority in Greece, and their landscape practices contributed to the formation of the post-monastic Byzantine landscape.

STUDY AREA

The study area is situated in Western Thrace (fig. 1). It comprises the mountainous area of the north-eastern Rhodope and covers around 13 km². The centre of the area is situated between the parallels, 25º 17' longitude and 41º 13' latitude. Its north-eastern edge is shaped by the border between Greece and Bulgaria, while its south-eastern border is formed by the edge of the Thracian plain. The climate is Mediterranean. The altitude varies from 200 to 1501m. The relief is shaped by numerous flows and slopes. The substratum is gneiss. The vegetation belongs to the subzone of Quercion confertae and the subzone of Fagion moesiacae.

The Pomaks have probably survived as a traditional society because, for historical and political reasons, they were almost completely isolated until the 1970s (Dalègre 1997). Even today, access to the Pomaks’ villages is difficult. The Pomaks still identify themselves as ‘mountain people’ and carry out practices which date back to the Byzantine period, such as pollarding, shredding, multicultures, apiculture, semi-transhumance and conservation of their environment.

METHODOLOGY

In order to identify and register the evolution of the landscape, data was gathered from:

- Landscape archaeology: study of elements visible at the surface (traces of human impact on the soil or other activities, terraces, aqueducts, mills, ‘wool washing machines’ etc.).
- Vegetation, species of plants and appearance of trees: composition, annual rings, nature of growth, their way of handling. 
- Etymology of the names of villages, castles, rivers, valleys etc.
- Written files, charts, cadastres, delimitations, books local authorities, historical books (descriptions by sightseers).
- Interviews. Emphasis was given to the elder shepherds and farmers, since their testimonies were valuable for the registration of the traditional practices.
- Extensive fieldwork, literature reviews.
- Use of spatial analysts ArcMap 9.2 to produce map showing distance zones from rivers.

RESULTS

Byzantine monastic landscapes developed out of the interaction between man and nature. They are the cultural, social, ecological and economic heritage of the people. Due to historical, demographic, social, natural and economic changes the evolution of these landscapes has been rapid and is usually irreversible, so they should be mapped, registered and evaluated before their complete disappearance.
The earliest historical testimony referring to Mt Papikion is found in the ‘Typikon’, (Foundation Charter) of Gregory Pakourianos, a Byzantine official, drawn up in 1083 for the monastery of Theotokos Petrizvonitisa (Batskovo) (Zikos 1984). The Byzantine historians and chronographers, Nicetas Choniates and John Cinnamus, refer to the existence of several ‘holy places and monasteries’ in their account of the events of the 12th century (Kourilas & Halkin 1936). Further important information about Mt Papikion is provided in the biography of two Athenian monks, Barnabas and Sophronios, written by Akakius Sabaites in the first quarter of the 13th century. Mt Papikion, according to Akakius, ‘got its name from the existence there of many large monasteries’; 370 are mentioned, which may be an exaggeration, but it does reflect the importance of the monastic centre (Zikos 2001). The etymology of the name ‘Papikion’ probably derives from the term pappos, which means elder or monk (Domparakis 1989).

The excavations showed that the first establishment on the mountain possibly dates back to the period of Iconomachy (726-843 AD), when the icon worshippers had taken to mountainous areas far from the urban centres where icon worshipping had been forbidden (Bakirtzis 1989). In the region of West Thrace is located a line of Byzantine cities: Komotini (Koymoutzina), Xanthi, Didymoteicho, Maroneia, Mousunoupoli, Anastasioupoli, etc. that constituted the wider urban environment of Papikion and with which the monasteries had close contact (Asdracha 1976; Papazotos 1980). On Mt Papikion, as in other monastic centres, monastic life would initially have been one of solitude. The coenobitic (communal)

Figure 2. Map with the monuments located in areas where remnants of vine and wheat cultures and pastures were spotted (red= cultivated areas, purple= pastures). See also the full colour section in this book.
system was introduced later, as it was on Mt Athos. Mt Athos is in the region of Halkidiki, a peninsula south-east of the city of Thessaloniki (in northern Greece). Athos is the last prong of Halkidiki’s three characteristic peninsulas. Papikion was organised along the lines of Mount Athos which continues to be, until today, Greece’s biggest and most important monastic centre. (Papachrysantou 2004). It is certain that the monastic centre of Papikio imitated the athonic system and kept communication with Mont Athos (Charizanis 2003). Excavated organised monastic complexes confirm the coenobitic system in Papikion which did not however, destroy the hermetic way of life. The coexistence of the two monastic ways can be deduced from a text by Akakius Savaites. The historical testimony indicates that monastic life at Mt Papikion reached its acme in the 11th and 12th centuries (Zikos 2001). The inhabiting of Mount Papikion primarily by anchorites (hermits), and later on the development of the monastic centre, can be explained on the one hand by the proximity to Byzantine cities, the existence of the Via Egnatia and the proximity to Papikion mountain, and on the other hand by the abundance of natural resources (Papazotos 1980; Cultural tourist guide 1999) (figs. 2 and 3). Monks took advantage of the natural environment to cultivate the land and create pastures. Pomaks exploit the same areas as shown in the first map (Charisiadis 1963) but afforestations during the 1970s destroyed evidence of both monastic and Pomak land uses.
Mt Papikion, along with the entire mountainous zone north of Komotini, is made up of metamorphic rock (gneiss, schist etc.) which forms the Rhodope Massif. Stones, pebbles and sand were available in the local rivers and were used as building materials during the Byzantine era. The excavated monasteries are located near springs, and close to either ravines or rivers (fig. 4). This figure demonstrates that eight out of nine monasteries were located extremely close to the rivers. The monks had benefited from the water, using it for the operation of watermills and of other buildings, whose operation relies on water (baths, water towers, cisterns). Furthermore, the rivers supplied the monastic communities with Lenten food, fish and oysters.

Everything we knew about Papikion until the 1980s was based on historical sources. In 1983, however, we acquired new information from the excavations that took place until the early 1990s. Excavations near the villages of Kerasia, Sostis, Linos and Mischos brought to light the remains of three single-aisled, cruciform, vaulted Byzantine churches, large parts of two monastic settlements and the ruins of a Byzantine bathhouse. All these remains date between the end of the 11th century and the middle of the 13th century.

Another element related to the physical planning/location of the excavated monasteries is their proximity to villages or settlements of modern times. It seems that after the destruction of the monasteries during the 16th century, the local Islamised people developed their villages or settlements near or on monastary complexes. An abandoned settlement was Chotzalar (hoca=clergymen, priests) its Greek name being Monachoi (monks). These names indicate the subsequent use of the place. More precisely, 6 km from the village Linos, the excavations brought to light a monastic complex and a little higher up, in the location Kilise Dere, a cistern and a watermill. The old Linos – known in Turkish as Eski Kiouplou – is situated at a higher altitude, directly next to the Byzantine monastic complex of Linos. Both names are reminiscent of vine culture: Linos in Greek is the wine press, while Eski Kiouplou (Küplü) can be translated into Greek as the old wine shop (Tunkay & Karatzas 2000). Most monuments were found in areas where remnants of agro forestry systems related to vine, and wheat cultivations have been attested. De-
Despite the afforestations in the 1980s, landscape units covered by these cultivations still exist, due to traditional systems of cultivation by the Pomaks. There are descriptions of how to use trees to support vines, reported as *anadendrades ampeli* (= vines on trees), during classical times and in the Byzantine period, or as *ypoklima dendra* (= under-vine trees), in the Byzantine period and later (Delivoria 2002) (fig. 5). According to the inhabitants of the area, this used to be a common form of multiculture. However, it is important to note that, despite the fact that Muslims preserved the cultivations and traditional practices, the use of certain products was diversified due to their religious beliefs. Instead of producing wine, they produced *petmez* (treacle). Traditional techniques like pollarding and shredding continued to be carried out, until their prohibition by the Forestry Service (Venetis 1985).

A water mill and cistern are located in the Kilise Dere ravine; Kilise means temple, church, while Dere means brook. Certain tree species in the area are relics of the monastic plantings. The walnut trees, in particular, are a versatile kind of plant, and in addition to the timber supply, they were used for fruit, oil and pharmaceutical use. Moreover, willow trees (fig. 6) indicate basket weaving, but they are also related to pharmaceutics. Through the interviews, today’s inhabitants explain that the willow leaves are also used for these purposes. The Kilise Dere cistern is located near the north-western corner of the exonarthex, and is one of the most important buildings of the complex. It is semi-subterranean and constructed of undressed masonry alternating with courses of brick. Four strong piers, which are linked to each other, and the outer walls with brick built arches, divide the building into nine sections. Each is covered with a small elliptical dome, of which the three northern most survive. A small stone staircase in the south-west corner provided access to the cistern.

In 1987, 3 km north of Mischos, on Mt Papikion, a complete Byzantine bath complex was uncovered, situated on a north-south axis. The monks made use of the local water supply and the slope of the ground in order to create a bath (figs. 7, 8). The oak woodland might well have been used for gathering firewood, essential for bathing, and might subsequently have supplied firewood and leafy hay for the Pomaks. The
numerous iron horseshoes, also found in the area, demonstrate the use of animals for transportation and agricultural purposes.

CONCLUSIONS

The afforestations of the 1980s covered the majority of pastures used by the monks and later by the Pomaks. Modern forests have also replaced the areas where firewood was gathered by the monks (for bathing), and subsequently by the Pomaks. Today, areas of traditional cultural landscape still survive, but some are on the verge of disappearance. The remains include structures, such as monastic ruins, wa-
ter mills, a bath and cistern, as well as ecological remnants such as walnut trees, pollards, the remains of viticulture and pastures. The landscapes of the study area are the results of a complex religious, rural and ecological history; they are cultural landscapes, derived from a complex interweaving of human and ecological factors.

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