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The Ethnoarchaeology of a "Passive" Ethnicity: The Arvanites of Central Greece

John Bintliff

I have spent many years researching in the Greek landscape and have grown used to the quiet rural life among the villages, chattering in the coffee shops with local people in my poor modern Greek. For a long time, my conversations with these farming folk were concerned with my interest in the importance of olives, vines, and cereals, inquiries fed by the scholarly debate on whether the modern Greeks and their lifestyle descend from the ancient Greek people and their practices. I was following the common practice in Greek archaeology of using anthropology as a guide to the ancient or prehistoric world of Greece.

All that began to change with the maturation of the Boeotia regional project, a long-term study of a province immediately north of Athens, of which I am codirector with Anthony Snodgrass of Cambridge University. We soon felt the need to do something about the neglected archaeology of the fifteen hundred years of post-Roman society in our province. We started by making sense of the numerous medieval towers which littered the Boeotian landscape (Lock 1986).

Nonetheless, the limited Byzantine and then Frankish (Crusader) sources provided a picture of a largely feudal landscape, filled with "Greeks" for the most part but also peopled by a minority of short-stay invaders—French, Italian, Catalan—essentially parasitic exploiters of local farmers. This did not disturb the traditional model of potential continuity of Greek rural populations and their typical lifestyles from antiquity to today. It was rather romantic, however, to discover the forgotten history of those dukes of Athens whose curious appearance in Shakespeare had always puzzled me—Otho de la Roche, Nicolas de St. Omer, and so on (now wonderfully revived in the recent introduction to Frankish Greece by our project specialist Peter Lock (1995).

Now all this time, we were living, each summer over many years, in a village called Mavrommati—"Black Eye" in Greek (the inhabitants told a tale about a mottled cow that sat down in that spot). Yet our Athenian students who attended the summer field-school we ran on the project found the village much stranger than we did. They came and told us, mystified, that the older villagers, left to their own private conversations, littered their talk with an unintelligible language. "Who are they?"—they asked *us*.

We soon learned from our project anthropologists (cf. Slaughter and Kasmis 1986) that our village, as most others in this part of Central Greece, was populated by Arvanites, speaking Arvanitika; in English this can be translated as, respectively, "populations with their origin from the region in and around modern Albania" and "Albanian-speakers." Yet our village looked typically Greek: the role of the State, the Church, and everyday customs looked the same as everywhere else in modern Greece.

Let us go back to the period before the Arvanitic presence—the high Middle Ages and the period of those Frankish towers—a landscape covered with flourishing rural settlements of Greek-speakers, dominated by an alien minor nobility from the West who had arrived on the spurious Fourth Crusade in 1204 AD. Our ceramic specialists (John Hayes, Joanita Vroom) have perfectly mastered the pottery of this Frankish age (cf. Vroom 1997, 1999), and in our surface field survey we have located a small sample of the indigenous villages overseen by the towers of nameless knights and bailiffs (figure 7.1). There is very good reason to believe that the tower-village network in Boeotia represents a high degree of continuity of favored settlement locations since the closely similar Greco-Roman network of nucleated villages and small towns (figure 7.2). Again, this is consistent with the traditional continuity model for ancient to modern Greece.

Such potential continuity, however, if it *had* lasted from antiquity to the high Middle Ages, very rarely survives the fourteenth century AD: archaeological and historical sources prove a dramatic discontinuity in settlement and population at the close of the Middle Ages. Numerous Byzantine village sites are abandoned at this time and new villages appear nearby after a clear time interval. The scanty Frankish sources for the fourteenth century tell us how much of the countryside was swept clear of Byzantine rural communities by the Black Death, the slave raids of Turkish pirates, and constant warfare among the dukes of Athens, the revived Byzantine Empire, and Ottoman Turkish armies advancing from the east. In desperation, the final, Florentine, dukes of Athens invited immigration from Albania (which at that time was a tribal region considerably more extensive than the modern state of that name), and large numbers responded. Boeotia, Attica, and most of the North Peloponnese were henceforth dominated in the countryside by Albanian-speakers (Jochalas 1971).

Even better information of a far more detailed and accurate nature is provided by the newly translated census records for central Greece of the early Ottoman Empire, after its definitive conquest of Byzantine Greece by 1453.

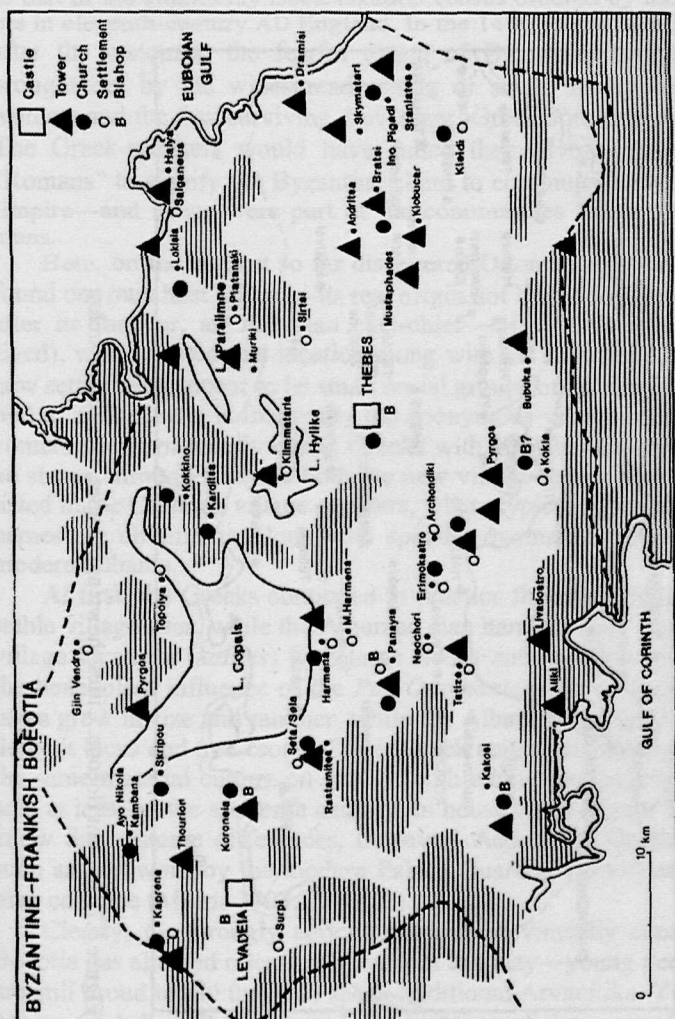


Figure 7.1. Byzantine-Frankish Boeotia. Monuments and recorded village settlements from extensive research. Minor rural sites from Boeotia Project fieldwork zones omitted.

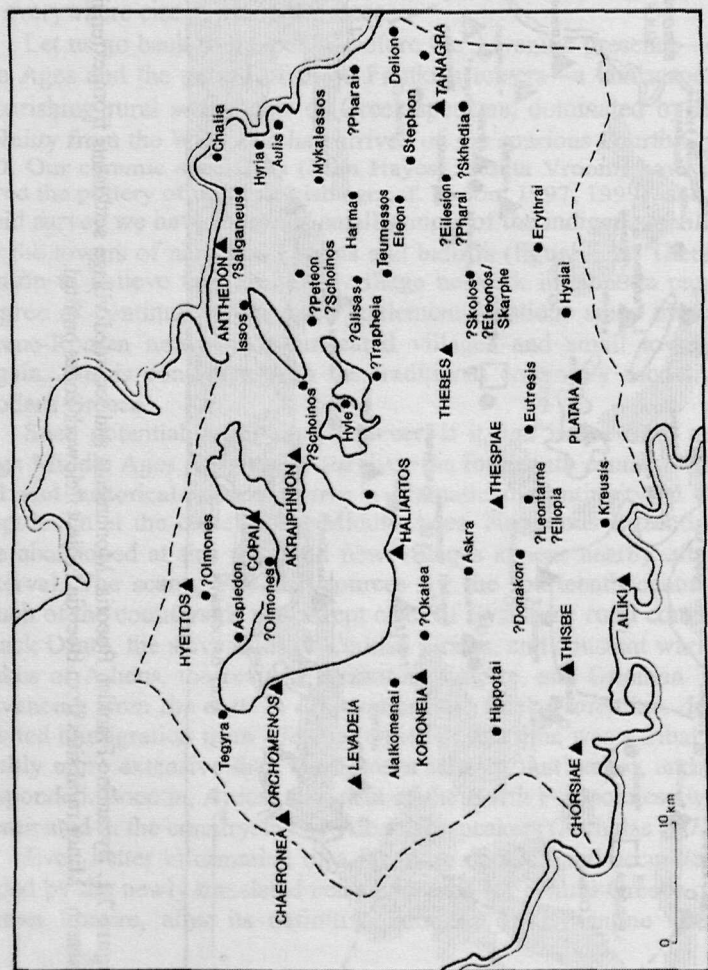


Figure 7.2. Ancient Boeotia. Cities shown as triangles, villages as circles.

These were made available by our project Ottomanist, Professor Machiel Kiel of Utrecht University (Kiel 1997; Bintliff 1995, 1997) (see figure 7.3). These tax archives describe the population of what is now Greece, listing—village by village—crops, animals, and the ethnicity of each settlement, in detail comparable to that of the Domesday Book taxation census ordered by the Norman conquerors in eleventh-century AD England. In the 1466 record (see figure 7.4), shortly after the conquest, the fearful extent of Byzantine depopulation is vividly brought out by the widespread scatter of small, newly colonizing Albanian hamlets and the few surviving, but larger, Greek-speaking refuge communities. The Greek-speakers would have called themselves, ironically, "*Romioi*" or "Romans" to signify the Byzantine claim to continuity with the Eastern Roman Empire—and hence were part of the communities called "Rum" by the Ottomans.

Here, on the earliest so far discovered Ottoman register for our region, we found our own host village—its real origin not linked to a cow but called simply after its founder, an Albanian clan-chief—Gjin Mavromati (John the Black-Eyed), who selected this location along with his followers. In fact, most of the new settlements appear to be small social groups of no more than thirty families, tied to a chief who is frequently the eponymous village founder. That these incomers were not merely ethnic Greeks with an Albanian-speaking tradition can be shown through study of both the new village names and the personal names listed in the Ottoman village registers, where typical Albanian personal and clan names are ubiquitous, along with specific onomastic references to districts in modern Albania.

At first, the Greeks continued to practice their traditional polyculture from stable village sites, while the Albanian clan hamlets were mobile around several village locations (*katuns*) with large flocks and cereal cultivation. Then under the benevolent influence of the *Pax Ottomanica*, both Albanian and Greek villages grew in size and number, while the Albanians adopted the permanent settlement locus and tree-crops of their Greek neighbors (see figure 7.5). One finds the same material culture on sites of both ethnic groups, expressed in ceramics and, at least by the sixteenth century, in house types (figure 7.6). I would like to know the costume differences, however! Aspects of Greek national costume, such as that worn by the modern Palace Guard (*Evzonoï*) are essentially Albanian costume (Mpiris 1997, 288 n. 2).

Clearly, the strongly agricultural and provincially conservative nature of Boeotia has allowed retention of custom to today—young people in their thirties are still proud to say they can speak traditional Arvanitika. Yet there are no "Albanian Clubs" in Boeotia nor local histories of these people. In cosmopolitan Athens, such clubs *do* exist without exciting much controversy (Carabott,

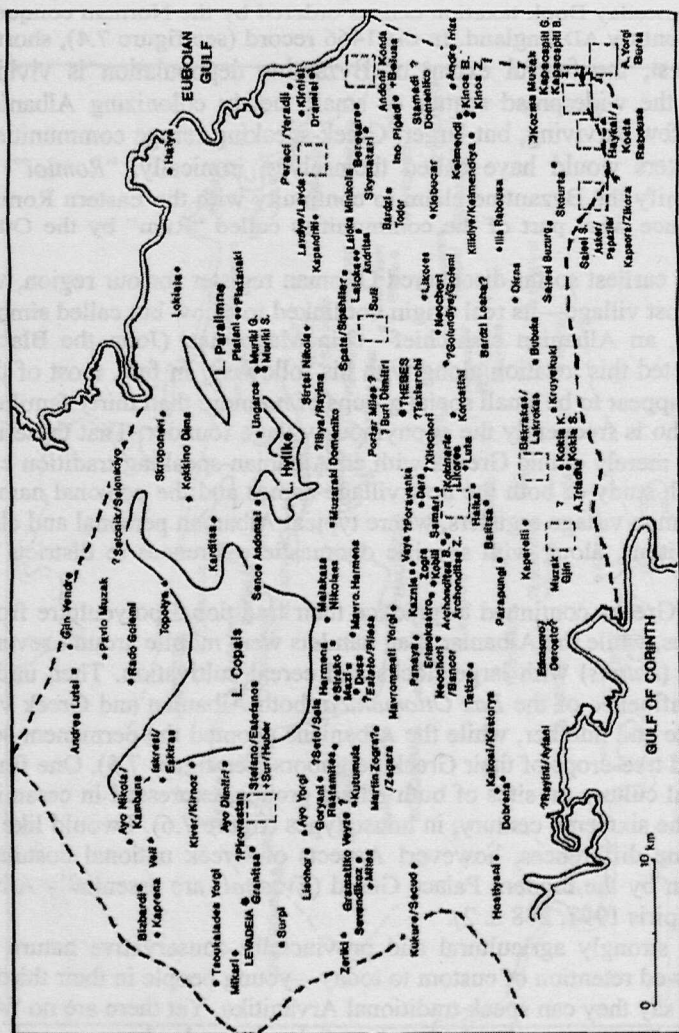


Figure 7.3. Locatable villages from the Ottoman imperial archives for Boeotia (fifteenth to seventeenth centuries AD). Boxes show approximate locations for named villages, circles denote closely located villages.



Figure 7.6. Traditional longhouse in the Skourta Plain, Boeotia.

personal communication, 2001), probably because their activity has minimal influence and public profile in a city containing almost half of the entire Greek population. The Greek national education system (cf. chapter 3 in this volume) stresses the heritage of classical Athens and the continuity of Greek virtues. Indeed, history and archaeology for Greeks today usually all but stop at the Age of Alexander, and the former only picks up again with the War of Independence in the early nineteenth century. During the intervening two millennia of "oppression," the Greek spirit slumbered in chains, with only Byzantine churches and icons to mark the eternal flame. The Albanian Greeks are a people without a formal history and no acknowledged place in the Modern Greek state. How did this come about?

First, we can explain the astonishing persistence of Albanian village culture from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries through the ethnic and religious tolerance characteristic of Islamic empires and so lacking in their Christian equivalents. Ottoman control rested upon allowing local communities to keep their religion, language, local laws, and representatives, provided that taxes were

paid (the *millet* system). There was no pressure for Greeks and Albanians to conform to each other's language or other behavior.

Clear signs of change are revealed in the travel diaries of the German scholar Ludwig Ross (1851), when he accompanied the Bavarian Otto, whom the Allies had foisted as king upon the newly freed Greek nation in the aftermath of the War of Independence in the 1830s. Ross praises the well-built Greek villages of central Greece with their healthy, happy, dancing inhabitants, and contrasts them specifically with the hovels and sickly inhabitants of Albanian villages. In fact, recent scholarship has underlined how far it was the West that built modern Greece in its own fanciful image as the land of a long-oppressed people who were the direct descendants of Pericles.

This Western creation of "the glorious continuing story of the Greek People" has been epitomized recently in the publication of multi-volume popular encyclopedias such as *The History of the Greek Nation* and marked even more recently by hysterical reactions to the supposed threat posed by the Slav Republic of Macedonia—not least merely by appropriating the name "Macedonia." Being saddled with such a foundation charter from the early years of independence has forced the Greek education system and state propaganda to focus the survival of the struggling young nation onto what Benedict Anderson (1991) has termed the "imagined community" of Greeks.

Thus from the late nineteenth century onward the children of the inhabitants of the new "nation-state" were taught in Greek, history confined itself to the episodes of pure Greekness, and the tolerant Ottoman attitude to cultural diversity yielded to a deliberate policy of total Hellenization of the populace—effective enough to fool the casual observer. One is rather amazed at the persistence today of such dual-speaking populations in much of the Albanian colonization zone. However, apart from the provinciality of this essentially agricultural province, a high rate of illiteracy until well into this century has also helped to preserve Arvanitika in the Boeotian villagers (Meijs 1993).

However, this is not a story to be uncovered easily. In the last few years, with the collapse of East European Communism, modern-day Albanians have flooded out of their homeland once more, in search of better employment, with a particular focus on areas settled by their forefathers in the Middle Ages and, more recently, southern Italy and central and southern Greece. They are welcomed as cheap labor but despised as untrustworthy ex-Communists. Any link to the local population is refuted with as much vehemence as illogicality. This denial of the multiethnic composition of the rural landscape has been helped by state-imposed systematic place-name changes throughout this century, many as late as the 1960s, through which a wonderful scatter of traditional Greek, Slav, Albanian, and sometimes Italian village names has been suppressed—wherever conceivable—in favor of the name of any ancient Greek toponym remotely connected to the neighborhood. Thus, for example, one of our study villages, formerly known by variants of its original Albanian founder's name of Zogra Kobili, has been transformed into the village of Leondarion (a classical locality not even certainly connected to the district).

While compiling my maps of village systems across the post-medieval centuries from the Ottoman sources (archives so remarkably discovered and tabulated for us by Machiel Kiel; see Kiel 1997; Bintliff 1995, 1997), I was careful to indicate in the English captions which of them were Albanian-speaking and which Greek-speaking villages. A strong supporter of the project, the Orthodox bishop of Livadhia, Hieronymus, watched over my shoulder as the maps took shape. "Very interesting," he said, looking at the symbols for ethnicity, "but what you have written here is quite wrong. You see the people in Greece who speak a language like Albanian are Arvanites, not Alvanoi, and they speak Arvanitika not Alvanika."

In this seemingly innocuous, and of course technically correct, comment lies a much deeper layer of ideology, signified by the mere substitution of an "r" for an "l." The bishop was voicing the accepted modern position among those Greeks who are well aware of the persistence of indigenous Albanian-speakers in the provinces of their country: the "Albanians" are not like us at all, they are ex-Communists from outside the modern Greek state who come here for work from their backward country; as for the Arvanites (traditional inhabitants of the Greek countryside speaking Albanian)—well, they are a kind of ethnic Greek population from somewhere on the northwest borders of Greece, where the line between the Greek state and that of Albania has always been fuzzy and permeable to intermarriage.

Thus the difference between an "l" and an "r" neatly allows the modern Greeks to divorce themselves and their history from that of the unpopular but widely employed, modern *Gastarbeiter* of post-Communist Albania. Shortly after this conversation, I saw the bishop pass across the courtyard of our project base—a converted monastery run as a research center—to talk to the genuine Albanian guestworkers who were restoring its stonework. I knew he was himself an Arvanitis, and listened with interest as he chatted fluently to them—and it wasn't in Greek! I was tempted, but wisely forbore, to ask him which language they were conversing in—Arvanitika or Alvanika?

In a volume focusing on historic identities and boundary formation, it is a matter of considerable interest to understand a minority's view of itself in relation to the larger national whole into which it has been merged. Given their special history, what is the relevance of the survival of Arvanitic language within the modern Greek state? In conversation, provincial villagers who recognize the Arvanitic origin of their community acknowledge this unproblematically. This is clearly helped by the prominent role played by Arvanitic and Albanian (i.e., more recent migrant) heroes in the War of Independence. But clearly, as one can see—and as these villagers point out—they are in every respect "typical" Greeks in their politics, lifestyle, aspirations, and the desire to see their children pursue professional careers in Athens, rather than remain within the limited economic and social horizons of the Boeotian villages. Basically, therefore, there is never a hint of Arvanitic resistance to Greekness, even as a means to signify the failings of Athens to bring better conditions to the countryside, or the virtues of the provincial way of life. One also gets the feeling that although the Arvanitic

background is unconsciously a source of local pride in knowing one's particular roots (hence the ease with which villagers will direct you to abandoned settlements centuries old, or discuss the arrival of their warlike, semipastoral ancestors), this is "water under the bridge," which has no real relevance either to the present or more importantly the future of local communities.

In contrast therefore to the more openly problematic issue of Slav speakers in northern Greece, Arvanitic speakers in central Greece lack any signs of an assertive ethnicity. I would like to suggest that they possess what we might term a *passive ethnicity*. As a result of a number of historical factors, much of the rural population in central Greece was Albanian-speaking by the time of the creation of the modern Greek state in the 1830s. Until this century, most of these people were illiterate and unschooled, yet there existed sufficient knowledge of Greek to communicate with officials and townspeople, itinerant traders, and so on, to limit the need to transform rural language usage. Life was extremely provincial, with just one major carriage-road passing through the center of the large province of Boeotia even in the 1930s (beyond which horseback and cart took over; van Effenterre 1989). Even in the 1960s, Arvanitic village children could be figures of fun for their Greek peers in the schools of Thebes (one of the two regional towns) (K. Sarri, personal communication, 2000). It was not a matter of cultural resistance but simple conservatism and provinciality, the extreme narrowness of rural life, that allowed Arvanitic language and local historic memories to survive so effectively to the very recent period.

This fits well with the observation that intermarriage between villages of Arvanitic origin and those of native Greek-speaking origin has been common. Presumably the migrant spouses would develop sufficient vocabulary to communicate with relatives who used little Greek, or a hybrid dialect (such as can be heard in Boeotian villages today, according to research by K. Papagiannopoulos). Interestingly, a scientific study which analyzed the marriage patterns of the forty-five traditional Albano-Italian villages in southern Italy (Biondi et al. 1993) found that such villages exhibited no more inbreeding than other rural communities in Italy and less than remote communes of the central Apennines and Alpine districts. Again one might suggest that in that other major zone of Albanian medieval colonization, a similar passive ethnicity has operated.

Two studies of the use of *Arvanitika* in Greece itself (Trudgill and Tzavaras 1977; Tsitsipis 1983) add further insight into Arvanitic attitudes within modern Greece. The language is shown to be heading toward extinction, with those using it rapidly losing grammatical knowledge and its deployment growing more limited in range and context. Language decline is matched with the degree of linkage to major population centers and macroeconomic interactions to the wider world, supporting my view of the importance of narrow horizons in the long survival of Arvanitic traditions and language use. Questionnaires suggest that there is also a compromise at work, in which Arvanitic communities do not undervalue local roots and yet embrace the reality of a purely Greek linguistic future: members of Arvanitic communities say it is better to be Arvanit than to speak Arvanitic. As the researchers comment, the last sentiment should mark the imminent demise of *Arvanitika* as a functioning alternative to modern demotic

Greek. I am not *entirely* sure about this—despite two generations of intensive schooling where Arvanitika was forbidden, a limited knowledge is still a matter of pride to some villagers, and in the villages with no main road communications, conversations among older folk can be 95 percent Arvanitic, even at the present day. For me as an archaeologist who wants to give local communities their own history—something even current Greek history syllabuses fail to do—an ethical problem does arise in privileging the very different basis from which Arvanitic villages have developed. Does this rural society really want to have such a history highlighted? Would rediscovering their supposed historical ethnicity be even disadvantageous to them, especially to their children? I am still unsure of the answer to these questions.

A Contrasting Narrative of Ethnicity

It would be a mistake to leave you with the impression that the "continuing glorious story of the [ethnically pure] Greeks" really did last from antiquity until the fourteenth century, before being subverted by the irruption of rude Albanians, or Arvanites. A second fascinating story, less well documented, must be told, if more briefly. It also provides an illuminating contrast in ethnic survival.

In Greco-Roman times, in the beautiful Valley of the Muses in Boeotia (Bintliff 1996), the resident population was largely concentrated in a large village, Askra. It was still flourishing in Late Roman times, to at least the mid-sixth century AD, and our surface survey has provided ceramic evidence to suggest it survived as a small hamlet throughout the succeeding Byzantine period. With the arrival of the Franks in the thirteenth century, its population was mostly displaced (doubtless against its will and at a Frankish lord's behest) a kilometer away to settle below a new feudal tower on a defensive hillside overlooking the ancient village. In the first surviving census of the Ottoman Empire for this district, for 1466 (figure 7.4), the feudal village appears, with its early modern name of Panagia, as a Greek refuge community surrounded by a sea of Albanian hamlets. Despite a further relocation in the troubled seventeenth century a further kilometer eastward, the village exists today—though typically renamed Askra—and it is possible to believe in the likelihood of some kind of population continuity in this community from antiquity.

Yet we should not forget that, in the late sixth century AD, the whole of the area comprising modern Greece was overrun and colonized by Slavs emanating from northeast Europe (Malingkoudis 1991). Central Greece, as most regions of the peninsula—the largest towns apart—was lost to the young Byzantine Empire, and it was only after recurrent campaigns in the late eighth century that Constantinople regained control over the mainland Greek countryside. What happened to the Slav settlers?

Some nationalistic Greek historians, noting the disappearance of Slav speakers and "Slav villages" in Byzantine historical sources for southern Greece by high medieval times, argue that the Slavs died out, went home again, or at

the very least were submerged definitively beneath the burgeoning Greek ethnic population. Many researchers today are converging on a very different story.

The earlier Byzantine-era villages (ca. seventh to tenth centuries AD) that we know of seem to be frequently on or near former Greco-Roman small towns and villages, or large estate centers. Since we know that a major settlement of Slav incomers is included in this settlement picture, it seems most likely that the Slavs settled places of earlier settlement and probably merged with surviving local farming populations of Greek descent to form mixed Helleno-Slav communities. The process was enhanced by the conversion of the Slavs to Orthodoxy throughout most of the Balkans and beyond, during this same period. What of material culture in this era? The pottery of this early phase is likely to be essentially derived from indigenous Roman traditions (the very rare finds of "Slav Ware" probably reflect a tradition brought with the colonizers which rapidly yielded precedence to the better products of local tradition, among both ethnic groups).

Our Valley of the Muses village, anciently Askra, much later known as Panagia—officially "Greek" in the fifteenth-century Ottoman census—seems to have passed in between through another village name, Zaratoba (in eleventh- to thirteenth-century Byzantine and Frankish sources, according to research by A. Dunn)—a Slav mountain-related toponym, fitting Askra's location in the hollow of Mount Helicon. Indeed many other Ottoman "Greek villages" in Boeotia have Slav names, such as Harmena and Goriani. Our inference is that the large Late Roman village of Askra shrank to a small early Byzantine hamlet, which was one such focus of Slav settlement and perhaps, or even very plausibly, of intermarriage with surviving Greek villagers.

Yet what happened to the language of these Slavs? Let us recall our comments earlier on Christian empires: the resurgent Byzantine, Orthodox, Greek-speaking empire, from the ninth century AD, privileged Greek language and culture, and, especially in the Greek peninsula, did not encourage local ethnicity to flourish. Thus the Helleno-Slavs became the merely "Orthodox and/or Greek" by the fifteenth-century Ottoman tax classification of ethnic groups in Greece. Zaratoba, thus named with its own suffragan bishop in the eleventh century, became Panagia (Greek for the Virgin Mary—the patron of the village church), and eventually, late this century, the name Askra has been revived for the most recent renaming of the final resting place of this village, providing a mythical charter of untrammelled continuity in local ethnic Greek population.

Conclusion

Beneath the apparent uniformity of contemporary provincial society in the southern part of Greece lie startling historic discontinuities and ethnic divisions. Even today strong memories and surviving language differences provide evidence of surprising tenacity for the most recent influx of non-Greek-speaking populations at the end of the Middle Ages. In contrast, a similar wave of arrivals in the early Middle Ages might never have occurred. A long-term project in

regional history and archaeology (the British Academy Boeotia Project) has enabled us to focus on the impact and long-term significance of the hidden ethnic diversity in early modern and contemporary Greece, employing the evidence of settlement history, material culture, sociology, and the Ottoman Imperial archives. The issues which have emerged shed new light on a theme of current interest in Greek studies: the emergence of Greek national consciousness during and after the War of Independence and its close relationship to Western cultivation of "the Glory that was Greece" during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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