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Prof. Dr. **DIONYSIS A. ZIVAS**
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TYPES OF MANSIONS AND POPULAR DWELLINGS ON
THE IONIAN ISLANDS

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by : Dr. Dionysis A. Zivas , Architect
and Professor at the National Technical
University of Athens .

The Ionian Islands , strung out along the Western shores of mainland Greece and of the Peloponnese , form a region which has several peculiarities. One of these is expressed in the types of dwellings which are to be seen there , both as regards the houses of the popular classes as well as those of the upper classes .

A proper study and evaluation of these types of domicile, which persisted even as late as the first decades in the present century , can be attempted only if preceded by a study of the region's history through the last eight hundred years. The history of this period differs appreciably from that of the main part of Greece or of the islands of the Aegean Sea and provides the principal explanation for the major differences which can easily be detected between the types of dwellings existing there and in the rest of Greece. It is , therefore, necessary , even within the restricted bounds of this paper , to make reference to those historic events which gave birth to the fundamental and deepest causes of these differences.

Until almost the end of the 12th century A.D. , the Ionian islands formed part of the Byzantine Empire . However, from the 11th century , the islands had begun to suffer raids by Slavs , Saracens ———— , above all, Franks . Their geographic position as the Western outpost of Byzantium , which was not always able to afford effective protection to all its outlying territories , explains the frequency of these raids which combined with the general Eastward surge , triggered off by the Crusades.

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A detailed account of these raids cannot be given in the present text nor would it serve any important purposes to do so. What is of interest is to underline that , by the end of the 12th century , the islands had ceased to belong to Byzantium and had passed into the hands of the Franks. In Cephallonia , Zante and Ithaca, a Palatine County was set up in A.D. 1185 , first by the Orsini and later by the Toceo families. This lasted until 1479. In the meantime , Corfu , after various adventures , was finally occupied by the Venetians in 1386. A century later and three centuries after the first Frankish conquest , between 1485 and 1502 , Venice occupied the remaining Ionian islands save for Leucas (Santa Maura) which did not become Venetian until 1684.

This three hundred year interval from the end of the 12th to the end of the 15th centuries was particularly critical because it coincided with the consolidation of Frankish rule on the islands and the simultaneous weakening and final collapse of the Byzantine Empire and of the small Frankish duchies which had sprung up across mainland Greece , especially after the 4th Crusade. The Ionian islands and Crete thus remained the only Greek territories under Venetian control. The three centuries in question were also critical because they formed the " dark age " in the history of the Ionian islands. Throughout the period , the conquerors oppressed the national and religious feeling of the inhabitants who were regarded and treated as no more than serfs.

As a result , when at the end of the 15th century Venice took Cephallonia, Zante, Ithaca and Cerigo, thus asserting its rule throughout the Ionian Sea, the islanders greeted the change in the light of a liberation. The fact that Venice hastened to restore a fair system of administration and to develop agriculture and trade on the islands , offering the while religious freedom , security from the Turks and the status of its " Greek citizens " to the islanders

should be taken seriously into account as factors explaining the relatively high degree of loyalty shown by the islanders towards their new master .

On the other hand , in order to make a correct assessment and interpretation of the Venetian attitude , it should be remembered that the interia between the close of the 15th century and the early part of the 16th , was particularly painful to Venice because it witnessed the loss , one after the other , of several important overseas possessions , mostly in Greece and it became obvious that the only ports which could be relied upon as revictualling stations for Venetian ships on the route to Crete and the Eastern Mediterranean generally were those of the Ionian Islands. Hence the need to fortify these suitably and to see to the material development and welfare of their inhabitants as a minimum in order to ensure their support against the common foe.

Another very important development occurred at the end of the 15th century. By then the Renaissance had evolved as a philo-
sophic and artistic movement as well , which shed its light all over Europe at the very moment when the Turkish conquest of the rest of Greece had put an abrupt end to the continuation of Byzantine culture and art which , three centuries earlier , had been cut off for the Ionian islands at the time of the first Frankish occupation . Therefore , orientation of the islanders towards Venetian culture which , at that time , was at a level well above their own and acceptance of the spirit and art of the Renaissance were the most logical thing that could have happened .

Venetian occupation lasted three more centuries until the day in 1797 when Venice submitted to Napoleon . A further 85 years under various rulers were to go by before the Ionian islands were to become part of the modern Greek State .

The three centuries of Venetian rule brought significant economic development to the islands , agriculture and trade thriving. The Greek Orthodox church quickly recovered almost all the privileges it had lost in the preceding period. The population grew , life gained

refinement and the arts flourished. Slightly delayed, the Renaissance and, later, the Baroque styles penetrated into the Ionian islands and Crete. These were the only Greek territories free to maintain links with the West and they were able to follow closely West European artistic trends, adapting them to local conditions and to the outlook and traditions of a different people.

Three major categories of dwellings can be distinguished in the Ionian islands.

- (a) those of the nobility which themselves can be subdivided into city mansions in the capital towns on each island, which formed the permanent residence of the family concerned and the country houses on the large estates, which were occupied as Summer residences only.
- (b) those of the urban middle classes which were concentrated in the towns, and
- (c) those of the popular classes both in town and country.

Studies on all these types of dwellings have not yet progressed to the stage where final general conclusions may be drawn. All the same, data so far available permits identification of certain basic principles of composition and distinction of certain types commonly found on the Ionian islands, at least in categories (a) and (c) which form the main subject of this paper.

One of the oldest and best preserved mansions which stood on the island of Zante until 1953 - the year of the island's almost total destruction by earthquake - was that of the Komoute family. It was originally built either toward the close of the 16th century or early in the 17th and was apparently subjected subsequently to various modifications and major repairs. The basic principle which ruled its architectural composition was the prevalence of symmetry both as regards plan and facades. This, despite the fact that, to the original rectangular shape, a small wing was added at one end. The internal layout of the rectangle is absolutely symmetrical, as seen from its entrance, the stairway and the spaces to right and left. A

second interesting point is to be noted in the apertures of the first storey and the imposing entrance which has the full height of the ground floor and the mezzanine. A third point of interest lies in the plan of the first storey - the " piano nobile " - with its spacious reception room known locally as the " portico " obviously derived from the Venetian " portico " .

These basic principles of architectural composition , which clearly have their roots in the Italian Renaissance , prevail more or less in all the large mansions of Zante . The mansion we have just seen has a fairly closed and austere facade , one could almost say of a defensive character . In other examples of such mansions the facade is formed into successive belts with larger general apertures and much more flexibility , such as the homes of the Domengiali and the Rosa families . However , both the latter belong to a later period.

The same basic idea of a symmetric plan and a central reception space applies equally to the country mansions on the large family estates. An interesting example is that of a mansion which used to belong in older times to the Solomaci family. Here, also, it can be seen that, although it concerned a much smaller building, the general composition was the same. It is even worth noting that, in this case , the main reception hall on the first storey goes right through the building to the other side. This is a feature which will be met in almost all the subsequent examples. A similar arrangement is to be found in the mansion of the Zavitsiano family on the island of Corfu. In this case also the plan is based on a symmetrical axis with a through central space , subdivided into two smaller spaces.

The most impressive example of a country mansion on the island of Zante is that of the Louadi family. In its older form, as handed down in a sketch of last century, it was a fairly large complex with an elevated central structure and two symmetrical wings. Around 1850 the building was extended and considerable reconstruction of its facades was undertaken, as seen from a drawing of the period.

Thus there emerged a building with an 85.50 M. frontage and a depth of 11.60 M. with an appreciably larger and taller central section and lengthy, symmetrical wings, to serve auxiliary and service purposes. It is quite evident that, despite the prevalent neo-classic spirit, a taste of Palladianism underlies the whole composition. What I would like to stress is that the plan of the central section continues to maintain the symmetrical layout, the same tripartite division by width and the same through and through portego, evident in the earlier examples we have seen.

This same plan with smaller exterior dimensions and in general adapted to more modest requirements is to be seen applied to a large number of farmsteads on Lante. These houses, for the most part two-storeyed, belong largely to the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is appropriate, at this point, to mention that with the exception of Cerfu, the remaining Ionian islands have suffered frequently from earthquakes. Thus it has been that the houses of the popular classes, less sturdily built, have been more apt to crumble and be rebuilt. For this reason, it is not possible to speak with certitude of examples older than the 19th century. However, the presence of this type of plan with the central hall and the four symmetrical smaller rooms, usually bedrooms, up to the 19th century, shows that the type of house built by the upper class had been adopted by the designers of popular dwellings as well and had gone as far as the dwellings of the farmers, at least in the case of the larger farmsteads. In these examples, of course, simplicity of construction is evident. Only the outer walls are of stone all internal separations being of lighter construction with a timber frame, plastered. These examples show the common uniform spirit which was born and prevailed among the Ionian islands all through the scale of architectural works, from the most formal mansions down to farmer's homes. This spirit will also be seen expressed in their facades which are likewise symmetrical with their even rhythm of apertures and side exits. The older examples bear evidence of greater austerity. In the la-

ter examples , the neo-classic spirit lends a different character but this does not sever the link with the older versions and retains the basic features of their composition.

The same type of plan was identified by a group of colleagues on the island of Leucas (Santa Maura). This island which was occupied by the Venetians for a relatively shorter period, retains evidence of considerable influence from mainland Greece with which it maintained close ties throughout the periods under review. Existence of the same type of plan, although somewhat altered by the presence of a roofed verandah, proves a more general diffusion of a standard type of dwelling among the islanders. This fact is, without doubt, due to a common way of life. It remains to be proved whether this can support the belief that there might have been some master builders who toured the islands building everywhere the same type of dwellings with minor adjustments to suit local requirements. This is a point which will require further investigation.

I would not like to end this short paper without touching upon an aspect of Ionian island houses which , I feel, is of particular interest. This concerns the manner in which the external surfaces were painted.

The examples I am showing all come from Zante and concern houses which escaped destruction in 1953 and others which were built subsequently or simply repainted after the earthquake. In all cases it will be noted that the colours used and the manner in which they are applied are similar. Thus, despite the destruction, the same spirit persists.

Colours used for painting houses, churches and buildings in general are, as a rule basic , ochre, dark red and more rarely blue for walls, green, blue and red for windows. A house may be painted throughout or only its main facade or even only its windows.

On the island of Zante, it is not only the houses themselves which are painted but also the garden walls. Anything built and plastered offers an opportunity for the painter's brush. These brightly coloured elements often add an unexpected result to the landscape. Painting of the gateways leading into rural property is also common.

Naturally, the main interest is directed to the house itself, as in the case of the last of the mansions I mentioned, belonging to the Loundzi family, where the whole building was painted in rose colour with white antes and frames to doors and windows. The same colour concept is to be seen in popular class homes. In the latter case, paint simply envelopes the whole house like an outer skin. More often, however, corners and frames of apertures remain white and the colour spreads over wall surfaces, intense and closely related to the architecture of the building which is thus enhanced as only paint can do.
