

C H A M B R E T E C H N I Q U E D E G R È C E
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES MONUMENTS ET DES SITES

COLLOQUE DE THESSALONIQUE 3-10 OCTOBRE 1973

Mme **ALKE KYRIAKIDOU-NESTOROS**
GRECE

SIGNALS OF SPACE
IN THE MODERN GREEK TRADITIONAL CULTURE

SIGNALS OF SPACE
in the Modern Greek Traditional Culture

On the maps of Greece prepared by the British General Staff during the Second World War it is interesting to see that there are mentioned all the little country chapels that are found in the open space, away from villages and towns. Apparently, these little country chapels - which are called in Greek "exokklessia", meaning out-churches - on account of their location, which is usually on elevated ground, can very well serve as trigonometric signs for measuring space; they can also be used as points of reference for finding one's way around, since their site can easily be located by soldiers on the spot, as it is well known to the people of the area. One need only ask at a nearby village the way to, say, the chapel of Saint George, and it will immediately be shown to him. He will have no difficulty in making himself understood, for his question is a familiar one, a part of the people's everyday life in connection with their environment. As a matter of fact, the physical environment is named after these little country chapels: -Where? is the question, and the answer is- at Saint George; meaning the area marked by the chapel of Saint George. In the people's mind space is organized in reference to these man-made signals, which, regardless of their volume or form - for they may be little country chapels or towerlike monasteries, simple wayside shrines or elaborate churches - have, all of them, one thing in common: they bear the sign of the cross.

In our modern European culture, which dates from the age of the Enlightenment, space is postulated to be infinite, continuous and homogeneous - attributes which mere sensual perception does not reveal. But traditional thought, which, from a historical viewpoint and only within the sphere of European civilization, could be called medieval, does not abstract a concept of "space" from its experience of space. And this experience consists in what we would call qualifying associations. The spatial concepts of the traditional folk are concrete orientations; they refer to localities which have a particular significance; and, in the traditional world view

this significance is always found within the realm of the sacred - if we are to use the well known dichotomy between the sacred and the profane.

In the Modern Greek traditional culture, as well as in all other primitive and traditional cultures, space obtains existence in the social consciousness of the people through consecration: only the sacred space has real existence; all the rest is for the traditional man a formless void.¹

To proceed, however, without delay from such general statements to more specific formulations, we should at once say that the purpose of this paper is twofold: first to examine the Greek way in which space is consecrated, and second to look for the significance of what we have called "signals of space" in the Greek countryside.

We shall now examine the Greek way in which space is consecrated by using, as our axis of reference, two sets of relationships: first the relationship between the physical environment, i.e. the natural character of the place, and the character of the deity or the saintly figure to whom it is dedicated; and second the relationship between the physical environment and the form, architectural and ritual, in which the god or saint is worshipped.

Concerning the relationship between the locality and the saint to whom it is dedicated - who is also its eponymous here, since it is by his or her name that the site is known - it seems that the present state of things is only the last phase of a very old tradition, dating back from the prehellenic times, i.e. before the second millennium B.C. For holy places continue to be holy throughout the centuries, even though the content of their holiness may change. The churches, monasteries and country chapels that mark the Greek landscape today are usually found on or by the sites of ancient Greek temples and sanctuaries, because these places are enhanced by the presence of the godhead. The pagan gods, who, after the victory of Christianity, were reduced to daemonic figures, were seen to wander among the ruins of their old abodes;

In order to exorcize them, the Christians dedicated the pagan he-
lies to saintly figures from the new pantheon. This practice was
also encouraged by the compromising policy of the Church, which,
having lost its face-to-face battle with the old pagan ritual, de-
cided to proceed along more diplomatic ways and simply try to re-
place the pagan with a christian god. The most prominent examples
in this respect are the Parthenon and the great temple of Magna
Mater in Ephesus, which were both turned into cult place of the
Virgin Mother, called in Greek "Panagia".

We do not have definite information about the relationship of
the ancient Greek gods with their places of worship, but, says
the late Christos Karouzos, one of the leading Greek archaeologists
of the last generation, "when we look at the sites of the ancient
Greek sactuaries, we know that each god must have picked his own
place; we may not be able to figure out in exactly what way a cer-
tain god became linked to a certain place, but we feel that the
character of the place cannot but bear some relationship to the
character of the god that inhabits it. For example, it is not by
chance that Demeter and her daughter Persephone were never worship-
ped on rocky sites or that Apollo was not worshipped in the plains:
the Homeric hymn to Apollo says it expressly: you liked the moun-
tain tops and the rocks that bend toward the sea and her harbor s".²

In the Modern Greek tradition it is only the Prophet Eliah-
"Elias", as he is called in Greek-that has a definite predilection
for his place of worship; the little chapels dedicated to his name
are always to be found on the mountaintops, and there he has pro-
bably replaced Zeus in his capacity as a weather-god, who ruled
from the highest peak in every neighborhood. Saint Elias, like his
predecessor, Zeus, is also a rain-maker: when there is thunder and
lightning the Greek folk say that it is the Prophet Elias who, in
his winged charriot, pursues the dragon of the sky in order to kill
him.

Another dragon-slayer of the Christian pantheon, Saint Paraskeyi,

is also connected with water, but it is spring water this time, and it very often flows through the eastern wall of the church, i.e. the wall of the sanctuary, for the little chapels dedicated to the name of Saint Paraskevi are usually on the water. Taking into consideration the shortage of water in the Greek countryside, we could probably be justified in venturing a sociological explanation of the phenomenon: by flowing through the wall of the church, water becomes accessible to everybody, to the whole community, and not just to the owner of the particular piece of land where the spring is found; because the church is always considered as common, not private ground.

It is true, however, that it is not only Hagia Paraskevi who is connected with water. The sites of the monasteries and country chapels are usually characterized by two main features: the first is water in the form of a spring, a well or a more spectacular kind of water^{sk} springing from a rock or found in a cave, which is called in Greek "hagiasma", meaning holy water, and is a definite sign that the godhead is present (hiérophanie or théophanie); the second feature of the holy sites is their orientation, which combines a correct position in regard to the sun and a beautiful view.

Now if there is water there are trees; and given the destruction of the Greek woodlands by historical vicissitudes and the goats, the only trees that have been preserved in the Greek countryside—apart from the forests proper—are those belonging to the sacred places. Church and tree are indeed inseparable in the Greek traditional culture. The tree is the signal of the church: when you see a big plane tree or sky-high cypress trees from afar, you know that the church is there; and even though it may now lie in ruins, the trees remain as the true witnesses of its one-time presence there. We have observed that there is a definite logic in the way that trees are planted around a chapel or a church: there are usually three or five cypress trees planted in a semicircle behind the sanctuary—following, actually, the semicircle of the apse—and two

more, each on the NW and SW corners respectively. In the chapels that have a view, we often find a row of cypress trees planted before the wall that overlooks the view; they serve, I think, in framing the view and making it more interesting, in much the same way as do the columns in the wing colonade of the ancient temples.

In considering now the second set of relationships which we have pointed out at the beginning, namely, the relationship between the physical environment of the holy place and the architectural form by which it is consecrated, we must insist in counting the trees together with the constructed part of the landscape. And this leads us to the conclusion, which unfortunately has not yet gained enough ground among the Greek architects, that, at least as regards the little country chapels, it is not the building itself that is important - for it is indeed a very modest construction and a least monumental monument - but the way in which it fits in with the environment. An ancient Greek temple, even though it seldom stands alone but forms part of a whole, could nevertheless be considered as an entity in itself, for it encompasses its meaning. But the little chapel on the hill does not; it is part of a whole and it can tell us nothing by itself. When you look at this whole, however, at the humble white-washed walls, the earthen tiles, the green cypress trees and the way they fit in with the blue of the sky and the sea and the mild contour of the mountains, you know that the way in which space is organized in the Modern Greek sanctuaries does not differ from the way in which it was organized in ancient Greece:

"The wonderful thing is, says Christos Karouzos, that there is no ancient Greek ruin site which would make us feel that there is a discrepancy between the character of the place and the architectural form of its monuments. Their material and color, their ground plan, their proportions and the form of each of their parts, the ordering together of the monuments in small groups, where each element, while contributing to the whole, does not lose its independent existence, and where each group does not ignore the existence of the other, - all these display an incomparable sensitivity for the character of the place, so that it looks as though it were the place that caused the monuments to be such as they are; and the so, on the other hand, have retained so much of the essence of the form

of the place, granting it at the same time stability and durability, that quite often it is the monuments that first lead us to discern the distinctive character of the place." 3

It is not only the architectural, but also the ritual form of worship that is closely related to the physical environment, as we have already pointed out. In the Modern Greek landscape this relationship finds its expression in the open space outside the country chapel, where the festival or fair takes place each year on the anniversary of the Saint. This festival or fair is called in Greek "panegyri", meaning literally "getting together". The place of the "panegyri" is called "panegyrotopos", i.e. "the place of getting together; and it is always a place where both the inclination of the ground and the position of the trees create the appropriate environment for a large gathering of people, who want to eat, dance, and make merry. The Greek "panegyrotopos" is, indeed, an excellent example of the organization of open space by the use of only the elements of the physical environment, arranged in the right way. But this is of course the natural outcome of an age old tradition, for the Greeks, ancient and modern, worshipped their gods on the same places and in the same way.

"Whoever has seen a modern Greek panegyris is strongly reminded of the ancient ones, writes Martin Nilsson, a leading scholar in the field of the ancient Greek religion. The cult is new, being that of the Panagia or some saint, but the life is the same. Tents, bowers, and booths are erected, and the people feast and make merry. Of course religion has been secularized, but this form of religion, which seems to us hardly to be religion at all, has shown an extreme tenacity. It satisfies the need which men feel to get together, to enjoy themselves, to feast and to make merry, and likewise the need of interrupting and lighting up the monotonous course of daily life. These are social needs which should not be overlooked, and Greek religion should not be blamed because it fulfilled them. In this respect it was more lasting than in any other.

The little country chapels are, we think, the most characteristic landmarks of the space that extends between the village settlements. We shall now turn to the roads and the inhabited areas. Here the

Most characteristic signals are the wayside shrines: miniatures of little chapels, with an opening in the front for placing the ikon of the saint and a burning candle. In Greek they are called "proskenytaria", meaning places in front of which you bow or cross yourself, or "ikonostassia", meaning ikon-stands. They mark the cross-roads; they show the way to a monastery or a church by marking the point where the path leading to it meets the main road; and, most important, they mark the limits of the village settlement by being erected in its entrance, each on one of the four cardinal points. These shrines mark the limits of the smallest perimeter of the village, i.e. the perimeter of the actual settlement. For there is also a larger perimeter, that which contains the fields, vineyards, orchards etc. that belong to the villagers. The limits of this larger perimeter are usually marked by natural signals, such as trees, rocks and stones, which often have a cross engraved on them.

In examining the shrines that mark the limits of the village settlement, there are two points on which our attention should be focused: first their architectural form, which differs from region to region and it is indeed one of the most characteristic configurations of the culture of each particular area; and second the ritual connected with their erection.

We have already mentioned that there are four shrines marking the limits of the settlement, each on one of the four cardinal points, in the form of a cross. The villages whose inhabited area is thus inscribed on space are called in Greek "crossed" villages, and are believed to be immune from the epidemic diseases and especially the plague, which up to the 19th century devastated the countries of the Ottoman Empire. Instead of shrines, the village could also be "crossed" by trees; age-old trees that also marked the limits of the village. The village of Kastania, for example, in Eastern Thrace - now belonging to Bulgaria - was "crossed" by seven such trees. When there was an epidemic, the people of Kastania, with their

priest and ikons leading the procession, would make the round of the village, ending where they started, so that the circle is closed. (The idea underlying this practice, is, of course, that of the magic circle - you close it and you think you are safe within.) During the round, the people of Kastania would stop at each of the seven trees marking the limits of their village, and the priest, with a knife, would take out a piece of bark, put in a piece of sacred bread and seal the hole with wax. This custom, and other similar customs, that aim at protecting the village of the epidemic by enclosing it within a magic circle, is called "inauguration" (in Greek "geniasma") of the village, and the name reveals that in the people's mind this is a repetition of the original act through which they appropriated the land that they were going to inhabit, by sacralizing it. The signs of this sacralization - the seven trees in the case of Kastania, the shrines on the four cardinal points in most other cases - are the permanent landmarks of the village that govern its relationship to the outside world. For by standing at the entrance to the village or, to put it in a different way, by being erected at the beginning of each of the roads that lead from the village to the outside world and vice versa, these shrines form a protective circle around the village, guarding it from malevolent visitors.

Now these signals mark, as we have seen, the smaller perimeter of the village, i.e. the dimensions of its breadth and width. But a settlement is three-dimensional, for it also rises in height. The limit of its height is usually marked by another signal of spacebearing the sign of the cross, namely, the peak of the village church. In a Cypriote village, for example, they say that Panagia, to whom the village church is dedicated, becomes angry if somebody builds a house taller than her church. It is true, however, that the church is usually built on the highest point of the village, and so the limitations regarding the height of its houses are sanctioned not by superstition, but by nature.

The village church does, of course, more than just limiting the height of the settlement; first and foremost it signals the public as opposed to the private space. Like the country chapels which, as we have seen, are built on the water, in order to ensure its public use, so the village church, whose courtyard usually extends into the village square, marks the communal space - and not only marks it, but, during the four centuries of the Turkish domination, from 1453 to 1821, which is indeed the high-time of the Modern Greek traditional culture, the church actually owned the community property, because the village community as such was not considered a legal entity by the Ottoman authorities.

In larger villages and towns, where there are more than one churches, these usually point to a movement of the inhabitants both in space and in time. For example, very often the oldest church of the village is the church of the graveyard; this may mean that the village has moved in space from where the site of the graveyard is today to the present center of the village. In the case of more than one parish churches in a town, we find that these usually mark the successive settlement of various groups coming from other places; the newest church naturally belongs to the latest settlers. Now in the history of the migrations of the Greek country-folk during the Turkish domination, it often happens that the people who were, for one reason or another, forced to leave their village and settle somewhere else, wished to return, after some time, to their ^(now completely destroyed) old hearths, the church of their deserted village, however, had been preserved, during all these years, by the christian piety of the Greek people; and it now becomes the pole of attraction, around which they build their houses once again. And so, the church, which, during their absence, had been a point of reference for the emigrants, now becomes for them a point of repair.

This is the story of the churches that are found in the wilderness, among heaps of stones, which might have been villages, castles or manor houses of the old landed aristocracy. In the valley of the

upper Haliakmon river in Western Macedonia, for example, the signals of the sites where the Byzantine fortresses guarding the mountain passes had been are today the churches, which were once found within the precinct of the castle, but now stand alone in the wilderness. In Mani, in the Southern Peloponnese, there is a host of beautiful Byzantine churches that probably mark the sites where the manor houses of the old landlords of the area had been; everything around them now lies in ruins - heaps of grey stones; but the little churches still stand, and the light blue background of their magnificent frescoes still delights our heart.

Alke Kyriakidou-Nestoros

L