

Friends of Tsamantas

December 2018



May 2018: partial view of the main church of Tsamantas. At the end is the plateau on which the “Acropolis of Tsamantas” is located.

News from Tsamantas

I stayed at my ancestral house (see photo below) in the village of Tsamantas in late May and the first half of June this year. I have come to think that late spring and early summer is the best time to visit. It's a wonderland! Sitting on the veranda, in the heat of the afternoon, I could hear the murmur of running water, downstream from the Roufliákas cascade. It was only just audible, however; the air was alive with the grating of the cicadas, the buzzing of other insects, and the chirping of sparrows nesting under the eaves of Aunt Athiná's house next door. Red-rumped swallows were making swift sweeping arcs close to the veranda, in their incessant pursuit of air-borne food. Every now and then, the shriek of a bird of prey cut through the heat; I could see it, drifting around in circles above the ravine, taking advantage of the thermals. I could also hear the soft tinkle of bells, from a flock of sheep and goats grazing in the shady ravine below. The sounds and sights of nature, and the immensity of landscape, triggered a deep sense of calmness...

However, not everything is well in Tsamantas. The depopulation and abandonment of the village continues unabated. In the last twelve months, four of the elderly inhabitants of the village have died and two were taken into nursing homes, one in the city of Ioannina and the other in the town of Filiates. Along with others in the diasporic Tsamantiot community who have died this year, we remember those local residents who sadly passed away:

Elias Ikonomou (Tsamantas); **Antonis Tsigos** (Povla); **Dimitrios** and **Marina Balis** (Tsamantas).

I reckon that only three households in the hamlet of Kamitsiani, and another three or four in Tsamantas, will be present in the village for the festivities of Christmas and New Year. It is lamentable

that a thriving community of over 1400 people a hundred years ago is at risk of becoming a ghost-village.

Regrettably, too, the dispute about accusations of misappropriation of the Bellos legacy funds, which I described in some detail in last year's newsletter, remain unresolved. More importantly, due to administrative changes the village has ceased to be a legal entity per se, and has instead become a part of the larger municipality of Filiates, so the matter of who will administer the legacy at the municipal level is still undecided. The hearing of the above two separate cases referred to the regional courts were once again postponed, due to the inefficiency and delays of the Greek justice system.

It is the end of era for the diasporic community in Worcester, Massachusetts, as a decline in interest has forced the historic **St. George's Hellenic Benefit of Tsamanta(s)** to call it a day, sometime in the near future. During the last four years, St. Georges has been instrumental in providing funds for the creation of a foodbank in Tsamantas. There are many people in Tsamantas and elsewhere, including me personally, who will be eternally grateful to the society's philanthropic activities. Many thanks to all past and present executive members of the Society, especially Nick Gatzios (the current head of St. George's), Nick Athanasiou and Toula Koulidis.



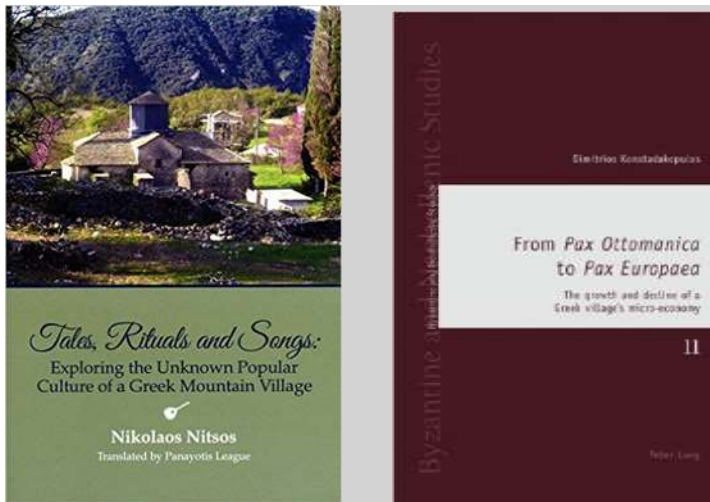
June 2018: a photo of the last two inhabited houses before the border guard post of Tsamantas. The so-called "Vesrevaneika", i.e. the houses of the Vesrevanis clan, are in the Pera Machalas neighbourhood.

Best wishes for a Merry Christmas and a Prosperous New Year

Dimitrios Konstadakopoulos

Bristol, UK / Tsamantas

TSAMANTAS 100 YEARS AGO



“..Social life amongst the Epirot community in Worcester was initially centred on the various Greek cafés, those bedrocks of Greek-speaking communities across the world. But in 1908 a group of immigrants established the St George’s Hellenic Benefit Society of Tsamanta[s] (henceforth referred to as the St George’s Society), funded by annual membership fees. Just one of many immigrant associations in the city, it offered opportunities for socialising, and raised money for projects to benefit individuals both in Worcester and back home in Tsamantas. It also helped to prepare those who were planning to return to Epirus on a permanent basis. However, Moskos observes (1990: 39) that disagreements and personality clashes were a common characteristic of such fraternal societies in the United States, and they would come and go with alarming frequency. The same fate befell the St George’s Society in 1915, after the arrival of some new migrants from Tsamantas brought to Worcester the animosity that was dividing the Epirot village, due to opposing political affiliations. The situation in the village mirrored the National Schism that had arisen as a result of complex issues in the controversy over Greek participation in the First World War, setting republicans against royalists. We know from Nitsos that the St George’s Society was disbanded because of the persistent political wrangling initiated by these new arrivals (1926: 331-2). But it was soon re-established, continuing its philanthropic activities with renewed vigour; indeed, a letter from Nikolaos Nitsos to the Greek-language Atlantis newspaper in New York refers to the fact that its members raised the very considerable sum of 40,000 drachmas (approximately \$8,000) for the construction of a new village school in Tsamantas (1926: 322). These members were the men commemorated on the bronze plaque shown in Figure 6, whose names initiated the online search that resulted in the database. Ten years later, a further \$1,500 was donated to the same project.

The Society was one of the first in Worcester to organise picnics at Lake Quinsigamond: a long, narrow body of water about two and half miles east of downtown Worcester. A photograph of what appears to have been one such picnic – taken in 1914 and now on display in the folklore museum in Tsamantas – shows more than 50 men from the village, all smartly dressed. Another photograph, from 1926, and with many more individuals present at the picnic, provides further invaluable evidence of the Society’s members. Unfortunately, no membership lists survive from before the early 1970s, when a fire in the Hotel Aurora – owned by Gregory Pantazis from Tsamantas, and the venue for the Society during its heyday –

destroyed all of the minutes and other documentation. But this group photograph suggests that in 1926 the Society boasted at least 70 members, including four women; a few children were also present. A third photograph, this time from 1937, reveals a membership of at least 130, including substantially more women and children than previously: thirty of each. For these women, the Society would have played a crucial role in providing a meeting place for them, since traditionally they were excluded from the cafés that men used for socialising. The Society continued to grow – as noted in the article by Anthony Simollardes in the Worcester Telegram – eventually becoming one of the largest and most active fraternal associations in Worcester, with 350 members in 1973. It is still, today, very much an active organisation, maintaining strong links with Tsamantas, and is one of the very few in the United States that supports academic work, sponsoring conferences and workshops.

The Society received an unprecedented fillip in 1999, when it was bequeathed a substantial sum by one of its members: Stavros Bellos, a pre-Second World War emigrant from Tsamantas. Bellos left the bulk of his estate (altogether worth two million dollars) to his native village, and a fine bronze bust erected in the main square of Tsamantas is testament to the villagers' gratitude for his generosity and loyalty..."

From my book (2014), 'From Pax Ottomanica to Pax Europaea: the growth and decline of a Greek village's micro-economy', Vol. 11 of Byzantine and Neohellenic Studies, University of Durham and King's College London, Peter Lang, Oxford.