

Friends of Tsamantas Newsletter June 2010



Dear Friends

The appalling economic crisis in Greece has serious repercussions for our community of Tsamantas. The **Folklore Museum of Tsamantas** has been closed since last autumn and there are no plans for opening it during the summer. The employee who kept it open last year has not received yet her wages from the Prefecture of Thesprotia. In addition, it looks unlikely that the community of Tsamantas will now receive the €120,000 from the **Pindos Programme** – mentioned in the previous newsletter – necessary for the completion of the second floor of the Museum building (the old school), which also houses the community's administrative office. I am very much concerned about the safekeeping of the museum's invaluable collection, which is in danger of being irrevocably damaged by damp and pest infestation.

Likewise, it appears highly unlikely that the **Monastery of St. George's in Kamitsiani** will receive the allocated €230,000 from the same Programme, for the restoration of its priceless wall paintings. On a more positive note, however, the building has now been made structurally sound and waterproof. Also, a new cemetery has been built on a nearby hill, and the graves within the church grounds are now in the process of being moved to their new location. I would like to express my gratitude to the Church Commission of St. George's, the head of the Community of Tsamantas, and the Abbot of Giromeri for their vital contributions to the work undertaken.

At Easter I was fortunate to have the opportunity, for the second year running, to celebrate the Holy Week in Tsamantas, and I attach a photograph taken at the time.



Seventy Years since the Death of Nikolaos Nitsos (1865-1940), the Scholar of Tsamantas

Nitsos (see the photograph, dated 13 April 1908) was born in Tsamantas in the second half of the 19th century. His father, Stavros Nitsos, who was a priest, was involved in a long and drawn-out legal dispute in the Turkish courts of Ioannina with the agas of Filiates, who had imposed a feudal system of land tenure on the 16 villages of Mount Mourgana, including Tsamantas. After a number of assassination attempts, he was obliged to seek refuge in the anonymity of Constantinople, taking his family with him.

This provided the young Nikolaos with the opportunity to study in the Patriarchate Academy, one of the most prestigious schools of the time. He graduated with honours in 1883, and worked as personal secretary to his uncle, Bishop Nathaniel – firstly in Serres, and then in Proussa (modern day Bursa) in Asia Minor, where he lived for twenty-two years, combining his job as secretary with a role as the local reporter for many of the Greek newspapers of Constantinople. In 1908, he returned to Constantinople, where he became involved in commercial activities. He would stay in Constantinople until 1914, when he decided to return to Tsamantas, now liberated from the Ottomans. He intended to return eventually to cosmopolitan Constantinople, but the events of the First World War and the disastrous Greek military campaign in Asia Minor, against the Turks, obliged him to remain in the village of his birth until his death, in February 1940.

While in Tsamantas, however, he was anything but idle. He continued his journalistic career and contributed articles, reports and letters to many Greek and foreign newspapers, campaigning avidly for the rights of his fellow villagers. But in 1917, when the Italians occupied this part of Epirus – albeit temporarily – the mail service was interrupted and his beloved newspapers stopped circulating. Nitsos felt cut off from the rest of world, and unsurprisingly, for a such an intellectual man with an insatiable curiosity, his isolation became unbearable. In order to occupy himself, he began to take a particular interest in the local customs and traditions of his fellow villagers, and started his collection of folkloric material. As he admits, in the prologue to his monograph on the village, ‘the more I collected and studied, the more interested I became.

I began to systematically collect numerous materials concerning the customs of the inhabitants, their language and expressions, the way of life of previous generations, and in general anything related to our folklore, history and ethnography.’ By March 1920 Nitsos had completed the first draft of his book, and in 1926, after he had managed to secure a bank loan to cover the costs, the book was published. He spent the rest of his life in Tsamantas in quiet retirement.

Nitsos was a polymath: historian, folklorist, linguist, environmentalist and journalist. In his writing he adopted a lyrical style, especially when describing the beauty of his village and his love for its natural environment. He also exhibits a fine sense of humour when he describes the traditions, habits, superstitions and prejudices of his fellow villagers. In 1992, a second edition of his book was published by the Athens-

based St. Dimitrios Brotherhood of Tsamantas (with an introduction written by Nikolaos Skopas, a contemporary scholar from the village), rescuing from oblivion an important piece of literary work. Remarkably, it was made possible only through the donation to the Brotherhood, by one of its members, of a surviving copy of the original, allegedly found in the flea market at Monastiraki in Athens.

This year, the St. George's Society of Tsamanta in Worcester, Massachusetts, is publishing an excellent translation of the book in English, which I had the opportunity to review. Thankfully, the stories and songs of Tsamantas will now be available to educate and entertain diasporic Tsamantiots scattered around the globe, now and in the future, and Nikolaos Nitsos, the scholar of Tsamantas, will never be forgotten.

PS. It is a great pity that his house in the village has been unoccupied for more than 20 years and is now in danger of collapsing.



Other News

Igoumenitsa's Archaeological Museum Opens – Local Treasures on Display

After many years of building works, the new Archaeological Museum of Thesprotia has finally opened, in the centre of Igoumenitsa. In April, I visited the museum and was guided around it by the archaeologist Ourania Palli, one of organisers of the permanent exhibition. The museum is outstanding. It includes some fascinating artefacts from the pre-historic to the Roman periods, imaginatively presented. For the people of Mount Mourgana, including Tsamantas, it has particular relevance, as it displays the priceless treasures of Glousta (Kefalochori), previously held at the Museum of Corfu. In 1993, archaeologists unearthed a grave dating from between the 2nd and the 1st century BC and bearing the remains of six cremated individuals (believed to be from a local family). It also contained a wealth of offerings, suggesting that the family were of high status, and providing incontrovertible evidence of the sophisticated artistic skills of the Epirote tribe that lived in the vicinity.

Of the artefacts on display, two wreaths made of gold and depicting the leaves of trees – in one case oak, and in the other, myrtle – and a pair of gold earrings in the form of wild cats seemed to me to be of particular importance and symbolism. The ancient Epirotes held nature in great respect. The oak, of course, was the holy tree of Zeus, at the oracle of Donona, and the valley of Donona is visible from Tsamantas (see photograph). The location of the oracle is somewhere between Mount Velouna (in the centre of the picture) and Mount Tomaros to its left in the far distance.

The St. Dimitrios Brotherhood of Tsamantas in Athens has elected a new council and a new president, Eftychia (Efi) Exarchou. Efi is a very energetic and accomplished person, and she will undoubtedly bring a renewed sense of purpose to the Brotherhood. I wish her and the rest of her volunteers every success.

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