The village of Tsamantas


The traditional village of Tsamantas

The traditional village of Tsamantas is located in Epirus in northern Greece, near the border with Albania. It lies within the prefecture of Thesprotia and in ancient times was part of the Thesprotian district of Kestrinis. To the north of the village stands Mount Stougara, part of the Keravnion range. This is a very rugged region, containing a number of peaks with primarily foreign (Slavic) names, such as Arotos, Doges, Tsouka, Lemiko and Koziakas.

Tsamantas is divided by two small rivers – the Stera and the Platanaki – which form the boundaries of the village's three neighbourhoods: Pera Mahalas, Thana, and the smallest of all, Pranthis. The climate is very pleasant, and around the village are abundant springs of clear mountain water, such as Korpi, Theleiza, Aili, Pigadouli, Rigos, Skrigiazi, Dafniza.

The location's potential in defensive terms was noted by the first inhabitants of Epirus, during prehistoric times. Settlements were constructed on the plateaux, and enclosed by massive stone walls. In the area called Staroda, for example, there is a small westward-facing plain on which the remains of Cyclopean walls can be found. The transportation and positioning of the large boulders used in construction indicates that our prehistoric ancestors were extremely skilled people.

THE ORIGINS OF THE NAME OF TSAMANTAS

Historical sources suggest that the village took its name in the middle of the thirteenth century from two Byzantine families by the name of Tsamantouri and Kamitzai. These families were prominent in the court of the Nicaean empire in Bithynia (Asia Minor). Indeed, the Tsamantouri family was related to the royal house of Laskaris, and when Michael Paleologos attempted to usurp the throne from the child heir Ioannis Laskaris, they revolted. As a consequence they were prosecuted in 1260 by Michael Paleologos and exiled to the Despotate of Epirus.



THE VILLAGE'S INHABITANTS

The population of Tsamantas has fluctuated wildly over the centuries. In 1832, it had just 120 families, compared with 280 four hundred years earlier. During the 1940s it reached a peak of 1800 inhabitants, but now has only 120 permanent inhabitants. This drastic reduction in the population is due to emigration to America, Australia, Canada and Europe, as well as other parts of Greece.

Despite its small size, the village has produced important personalities in every area of human activity. In the old days, many of its inhabitants were capable enough to graduate from the prestigious 'Grand Patriarchate School' in Fanari, Constantinople, and in more recent times, the village's students have excelled in many disciplines, as educationalists, writers, folklorists, historians, doctors, merchants and artists. Furthermore, there was a tradition in the village for many centuries of men becoming itinerant workers – coopers, tinkers, builders and so on – and on returning to village, these men brought with them customs and traditions from other parts of the country which enriched the life and language of the village. All of this has contributed greatly to the educational and cultural inheritance of Tsamantas.

EDUCATION AND RELIGION

The inhabitants of Tsamantas have always been fervently religious, and this is demonstrated by the great number of churches and chapels found in and around the village. For many centuries it has been an exclusively Christian community.

During the Ottoman occupation, the role of schoolteacher always fell to one of the village's priests, despite their limited education. In later years, Tsamantas became integrated within the wider Greek educational system.

ECONOMIC LIFE

The soil of Tsamantas is of poor quality, and in the past, farm produce could only meet the needs of the village for less than half the year. The shortfall had to be brought in from more productive farms in nearby areas. Despite the poor local production, however, the villagers lived well, due to the money sent home by emigrants and itinerant craftsmen.

This description of the village of Tsamantas was written in 2002 by one of its sons, the renowned folklorist Kostas Zoulas. It has been translated from the Greek by Dimitrios Konstadakopulos . Further information on the customs and traditions of Tsamantas and its religious, family, social and ethnological life can be obtained by contacting Mr Zoulas at the Folklore Museum of Tsamantas.

Photos from the village Tsamantas

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