



Contribution from PAXOS



Water through the ages

The island of Paxos came out of the water, lived and is still living surrounded by water, it has based its financial structure on water and at the same time it has been suffering from lack of water for centuries.

It is well known that primitive communities camped at locations where there was some type of water source. Then why did the first inhabitants of Paxos chose to live here?

During the glaciers period the piece of land, which later became our island, was attached to the mainland, while the river Kalamas - which ends in the Ionian sea close to Igoumenitsa town - at the time ended between Paxos and Parga. With the melting of the glaciers the water level raised gradually and the particular piece of land was cut off from the mainland becoming the island of Paxos. The people trapped on the newly created island, were forced to find means of survivor.

The above version of the island's creation is proven by the hundreds of prehistoric tool parts and whole tools specimens found everywhere on the island, some of which are part of our museum collection.

The limb based ground could not retain but trivial amounts of water, barely enough for the inhabitants survivor. At the same time these meagre quantities were enough to keep life going on the island and drive the natives to invent various ways of gathering and preserving this vital element.

Mythology however has its own version. According to the most popular myth Poseidon, God of the Sea, violently and in quite a hurry cut a piece of land from the south of Corfu with his trident to create a love refuge for his mistress, the Nereade Amfitrete and that is how Paxos was created.

The homes of the first inhabitants were caves, situated a lot higher from ground level for security reasons, which later - when the sea level rose - became sea caves. According to Athinagoras the bishop of Paramithia and a famous researcher of the epic poetry of Omiros these sea caves became the secluded and sacred homes of the Nereades, daughters of the ancient Sea God, Nireas and the first inhabitants were forced to search for refuge even higher and more to the center of the island.

The little bit of water that found its way to the sea through the north west cliffs was soon spotted by the islanders, who opened pathways to reach it and dug holes in the ground to gather it and carry it home in leather packs. When the islanders understood that after heavy rain, water run free on the ground or very close to the ground surface, they built wells, that kept self- filling after every rainfall. Wherever they found solid rock, they learned to carve it into water reservoirs, digging at the same time channels at the rocky surface around it to guide the rain water into them. As time went by they learned to cover those reservoirs with stone lids or to build stone huts around them to protect the water quality and also keep it safe from thieves. Water stealing - because of lack of it - was a very common offence and some times it happens even nowadays.

Next to the ancient wells, the Venetians constructed cisterns and then the English engineers built large water tanks that relieved the local problem. All those constructions, most of them still functionable today, have been declared as preserved architectural monuments.

It is quite true that Paxiot women carried water to their homes from the occasional reservoir on their heads covering usually a distance of 1,5 to 2 kilometers at a time, putting a curved piece of cloth between their head and the bucket, which was called "podolos". It has been medically proven that this was the reason why no Paxiot woman suffered from cervical syndrome. Professional water bearers also carried water but on their donkeys, hanging 2 large wooden cubical boxes from each side of the animal, called "cartes".

Until recently only rich houses could afford a private water tank in their home grounds, that is why it was always considered as a status symbol.

Starting from the 1970's every new house owner first built his own water reservoir, accepting the fact that it increased the financial cost quite significantly. Around the same period of time, pipes carried water to 3 or 4 different locations in every village, where large metal taps were installed. These taps became meeting points for all the land ladies who queued in front of them to fill their buckets with water on fixed hours of specific week days. The empty buckets, marked specially by each lady, were put in queue the day before the arranged delivery day and that queue was respected by all. Of course there were exceptions of women trying to get their water outside the queue, which lead to terrible quarrels, fist fights and hair pulling.

The domestic need for water increased steadily since the 1960's and was met by digging wells and drilling salty water. But after a while the excessive drilling and pumping resulted to a serious deterioration of the water's quality until it became pure sea water. Salty water offers a kind of solution for some types of domestic usage but it destroys drain pipes and the soil. Our Municipality's policy is to gradually stop using the salty water and to let fresh water run through the whole pipe system for all types of domestic needs.

The last few years two large water reservoirs have been built on the island delivering filtered water to increasing numbers of households.

Water has always been a basic element of life for Paxos and has inspired a significant culture throughout time on the island.

Stone channels that gather water from house roofs, various sizes irrigation basins for animals, clothes washing basins, different types of clay, wooden, stone cans testify for the everlasting human effort of gathering and saving water.

In the old times, women used to wash their carpets and heavy woolen clothes at sea with clay and then rinse them with partly salty and partly fresh water they took from the salty wells dug on beaches. There were cases of domestic animals (sheep and goats) that had gotten used to drinking sea water to survive and they were actually sold for more money as they were considered tastier.

A certain philosophy, a certain tradition, an architectural style, a specific art form and an adequate management policy have occurred out of and have a reference point in the water, water synonymous to survivor, surrounding the island, hindering people to abandon it and at the same time offering a means of communication with the rest of the world, a pure spring of its life and future.