

SALENTINIAN GREECE - IN SALENTO, IN SOUTHERN ITALY

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Κυριακή, 14 Αύγουστος 2011 19:39 - Τελευταία Ενημέρωση Κυριακή, 14 Αύγουστος 2011 20:10



Salentinian Greece: in Salento, in southern Italy

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This area is located in Terra d'Otranto, once part of the Eastern Roman Empire. In this region of Salento, the remains of this important past are many:

Orthodox monasteries, abandoned "casali" or villages, Byzantine churches and crypts, place names, celebrations, dances, songs and a very vast literary output. The great humanist Antonio De Ferraris, known as the Galateo (Galatone, 1448-1517), described this region in the famous book «De Situ Japygia». Furthermore his family spoke Greek and observed the Greek-Orthodox rite: this rite is nowadays almost completely forgotten, but at the time of the Byzantine rule it represented the standard in the Terra d'Otranto.

The reasons for the end of this tradition must be sought in the policies enforcing hegemony carried out by the Catholic Church since the Norman conquest of Apulia with Robert the Guiscard (1071), in the fall of Constantinople (1453), in the interruption of the communications with the religious centres of the East, in the Turkish invasion of Otranto and of Salento (1480)

and the consequential destruction of the most important Greek-Salentine monastery: St. NICOLA DI CASOLE. This cenobium, together with all others following the ancient monastic Orthodox traditions encoded by St. Basilus the Great and located in the Salentine peninsula (they were thirty-four), used to play not only a religious role, but also especially a cultural one, thanks to the presence of a very rich library (whose manuscripts are now to be found in Turin, Florence, Naples, Venice, the Vatican City, Paris, London, Berlin). Inside of St. Nicola di Casole there existed a school open to whoever wanted to come closer to Greek and Latin literature and civilization.

The campaign of the Normans in Apulia was legitimated by the Melfi Agreement (1059) with Pope Nicolo II, who wanted to put these lands of the border under his control. The fact that the Greek-Orthodox rite, the churches and the “PapadeV” (priests) survived living together with the Roman-Catholic rite in the largest part of Salento even after the Concile of Trento (1563) was originally due to the political intentions of the Normans, who wanted to prevent a Byzantine conquering back this territory.

To them, it was sufficient to introduce feudalism and appoint Latin bishops in the main cities. As to the rest, since they wanted to obtain the social consent, it was not convenient to suppress the Christian Orthodox liturgy, since the mother tongue of the majority of the population was Greek. The original bilingual composition of the community of the Terra d’Otranto has been recognized many times and the Hellenophone (Greek speaking) area included twenty-five towns.

Successively in most of the towns there was a passage from the usage of Greek in the higher sphere of social communication to the usage of Latin (even a learned one) as soon as the Byzantine army along with the Byzantine administration had left the territory of Salento.

Nowadays, this area – known under the name of Grecia Salentina – is constituted by nine towns, that is: Calimera, Castrignano dei Greci, Corigliano d’Otranto, Martano, Martignano, Melpignano, Soleto, Sternatia, Zollino. In these towns, a part of the population can still speak Griko, the Greek-Salentine language very similar to the language spoken today in Greece (Dhmotikh), and that in Italy is only spoken in the area of Bova in the province of Reggio Calabria.

Calimera (Calimera, “good morning” in both Greek and Griko) is a small town of 7,296 inhabitants in the Grecia Salentina area of the Salento peninsula in Italy, located between Gallipoli and Otranto. It belongs to the province of Lecce.

The inhabitants of Calimera besides Italian also speak Griko, a linguistic amalgam comprising ancient Greek, Byzantine Greek and Italian elements. Apart from the language, the folklore, traditions and history of Calimera reveal significant Greek influences over the course of time, presumably from the time of the ancient Magna Graecia colonisation in the 8th century BCE. Calimera’s motto is “Zeno esù en ise ettù ‘s ti Kalimera” (in Greek script: Ζένο εσου ‘εν εισαι ετου στη Καλημέρα), meaning “You are not a stranger here in Calimera”.

Castrignano dei Greci is a picturesque commune of Grecia Salentina with its origins lost in legend. In fact according to some scholars it was built by a Gentilitia Roman named “Castrinus” ; others say that ist name comes from the Latin word “castrum” (camp) or from the Greek term

“kastron” (castle) in further confirmation of its close link with Greece. Castrignano kept the Greek religious rite until 1614 when Don Menelao Pensa died. His successors celebrated Mass with the Latin rite. However it is interesting to know that notwithstanding the Latin rite was the official one in Castrignano Mass was said according to the Greek rite and the local Parish Church was run, for the will of the people, by Greek priests. We know for sure from a reliable historical source that during the pastoral visit made by the Archbishop of Otranto F. DA Capua in 1522 in the village you could see several Byzantine churches which have disappeared now: among them Saint Maria of the Martyrs, St. Stephen, St. Maria delle Puzze or of the Graces (with Necropolis), or the Trinity and of St. Anastasia. During the Medieval age Castrignano was given to Pietro Indrini by King Tancredi and later of the most important Seignories we must remember the Prato, the Maresgallo and the Gualtieri. In the populated village you can admire the Byzantine Crypt of St. Onofrio which dates back to the 6th century. It was built by Basilian monks who probably enlarged a pre-existing natural cave using it as a worship place. Inside St. Onofrio's Crypt, once surmounted by a small church dedicated to St. Maria of the Visitation and St. Maria ed Hidria, there is a Greek inscription “I B y Z” i.e. 1237 the probable date of a renovation. The Baronal Castle, cited in a parchment of Charles I of Angiò was once surrounded by a ditch and furnished with a draw bridge. Upon the main door you can admire the noble coat of arms of the Gualtieri family (of unhappy popular memories); the building structure underwent several modifications during the Middle Ages and Renaissance as well as some years ago. The present church dedicated to the “Madonna of the Annunziata” was built by Rocco Stomeo in 1878 on the Lecce architect Federico Elmo. Inside it you can admire nine precious frescoes painted by the famous painter Saverio Altamura of Foggia. They were painted in 1892. There are other works of the artist, among them “Mario's Triumph”, in Naples, Florence, Rome and Pompei. Among the other monuments there is the Church of the Madonna of the Arcona (1731), the Church of the Immacolata (1650), the Clock Tower built in the same place where once there was a pre-existing tower which may have inspired the coat of arms of the commune. In the Pozzelle Park there are some wells (in a good state of preservation), about one hundred which once satisfied the water needs of the local population. The name Arcona represents an onomastic peculiarity of Castrignano dei Greci. Some scholars are convinced it comes from “Icona” (Holy Image) from “Arconte” (Supreme Judges in Athens in ancient times), from “Arch” as the one once was present inside the chapel of the homonymous Madonna or from the Greek words “Arco” (to be the first) “Arkeion” (Dignity) etc. Among the well known characters we cite: Fra' Onofrio from Castrignano, a preacher and a theologian; Vittorio Tarantini an eminent philosopher (XV century); Fernando Marzo, a philosopher and a scientist (XVII century), Leonardo Mascello, an archbishop and poet; Angiolino Cotardo an esteemed Hellenist and a valiant defender of the Greek language and culture.

Corigliano d'Otranto is a small town of 5,632 inhabitants in the province of Lecce in Apulia, Italy. It is one of the nine towns of Grecia Salentina.

Martano is a small town of 9,503 inhabitants in the province of Lecce in Apulia, Italy. It is the biggest town of Grecia Salentina, and is 20 km from Lecce and 18 km from Otranto.

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The main attraction in the town is the Baronal Castle, built in the 15th century, while the biggest churches are devoted to the Mother of the Assumption and to Madonna del Rosario. The town also owns the highest menhir in Apulia (Santu Totaru menhir, 4.80 mts) and an ancient Cistercians monastery devoted to the Mother of the Consolation.

Martano gave birth to Giuseppe Grassi, who signed the Constitution of Italy in 1948, Salvatore Trinchese, sea biologist and scientist of the 19th Century and Cosimo Moschettini, agricultural scientist of the Enlightenment.

Martignano is a small town of 1.770 inhabitants in the province of Lecce in Apulia, Italy. It is one of the nine towns of Grecia Salentina.

Melpignano is a small town of 2,209 inhabitants in the province of Lecce in Apulia, Italy. It is one of the nine towns of Grecia Salentina. Melpignano has a population of 2.209 inhabitants (Melpignanesi) and a surface of 10,93 square kilometers thus showing a population density of 202,1 inhabitants per square kilometer. It rises 89 metres above the sea level.

Soletto is a small Greek speaking city located in the province of Lecce in Apulia, Italy. The town has a total population of 5537 and is one of the nine towns of Grecia Salentina. In the 5th century, Soletto was probably elevated to bishopric seat, of Greek rite. In the 13th century the Angevine rules of Naples chose the city a capital of a county, ruled by the di Castro, Del Balzo, Orsini, Campofregoso, Castriota and Sanseverino, Carafa and Gallarati-Scotti families, until feudalism was abrogated in 1806. Soletto took part to the Neapolitan Republic of 1799 and a was a center of Carboneria during the Italian Risorgimento.

Sternatia is a small town of 2,698 inhabitants in the province of Lecce in Apulia, Italy. It is one of the nine towns of Grecia Salentina.

Zollino is a small town of 2,194 inhabitants in the province of Lecce in Apulia, Italy. It is one of the nine towns of Grecia Salentina

This page is an introduction to Coordinamento Associazioni della Grecia Salentina of Sternatia (Lecce), in the heart of GRECIA SALENTINA.

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