BUILDING PRACTICES IN THE HELLADIC PROVINCE OF MANI DURING THE KOMNENIAN PERIOD:

The Assimilation of the Prevailing Trends in Church Architecture*

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Mani, the middle of three peninsulas that make up southern Peloponnese terminating in Cape Tainaron, has an unusually rough and rocky terrain formed by the southern end of Mount Taygetos. As a result, the mountainous or semi-mountainous areas prevail, with limited plain, cultivable lands. Although deprived of significant natural resources, Mani was densely inhabited for centuries. The inaccessible mountain masses rather hinder land transport, leading to isolation, so that the coves and the natural harbors of the coastline constitute the main gateways of communication. The above features designate the Mani peninsula as a distinctive geographical, historical and residential entity, whose widely famous cultural physiognomy crystallized at a late date.1

During the Byzantine period this remote province does not play an important role in the affairs of the empire, so that relevant references in written sources are scarce and obscure.2 The gap is filled by the evidence of the archaeological remains, an exceptional wealth of structures, which attest to intense human activity in the area. Indeed, the vast majority of edifices consist of ecclesiastical buildings, usually preserving their painted and sculptural decoration.3 The impressive number of surviving churches offers the opportunity to study the monuments as a whole, to comprehend the evolution of forms, structures and building practices, commenting on

* Thanks are owed to Vasilis Tsarbos for his help with the translation of the paper into the English language.
2 Avraméa 1998 passim.
3 The wealth of surviving churches is probably connected to the historical conditions prevailing during the period of Ottoman and Venetian rule, the isolation of the area and the absence of major human – caused or physical calamities throughout the centuries. Many churches are still intact and in use, while other are in a ruinous state, see the catalogue provided by Drandakis 1986.
issues of architectural and artistic output, tracing relations and interactions between bordering areas and identifying building workshops.

Fig. 1: Sketch of the Mani peninsula with churches mentioned in the paper

1. Megali Kastania, Hagios Petros
2. Platsa, Hagios Demetrios
3. Nomitsi, Metamorphosis
4. Charia, Hagios Georgios
5. Kalou, Hagia Anna
6. Kalou, Hagios Theodoros
7. Pyrgos Dirou, Hagios Ioannes Theologos
8. Pirgos Dirou, Hagios Vlasios
9. Pirgos Dirou, Hagia Paraskevi
10. Glezou, Hagia Varvara
11. Glezou, Hagios Nikolaos
12. Glezou, "Dyo Kliðia"
13. Mandofores, Hagios Vasileios
14. Triantafylia, Hagia Solomonis
15. Triantafylia, Panagia
16. Chareuda, Taxiarchis
17. Frangulia, Faneromeni
18. Frangulia, Hagios Petros ("Petrakis")
19. Tsepakas, Hagios Theodoroi
20. Kañona, Hagios Theodoroi
21. Kañona, Hagios Vasileios
22. Vamvaka, Hagios Theodoroi
23. Angriádaki, Hagios Athanasios
24. Ermos, Hagia Varvara
25. Erinmos, Soulani
26. Cape Tigan, basilica
27. Settlement of Hagios Georgios, Episkopi
28. Gardenitsa, Hagios Ioannes Theologos
29. Gardenitsa, "Hagios Petros"
30. Gardenitsa, Hagios Maries
31. Kita, Hagios Sergios and Vakchos
32. Ochia, Hagios Nikolaos
In the 11th and 12th c. the region belongs to the theme of Hellas and Peloponnesos.⁴ The well known from the written sources castle of Maini, identified with the fortification preserved at Cape Tiganis, serves as the military and administrative center of the peninsula, a strategic place for the defense and the control over the sea routes. On this fortified settlement we should also look for the seat of the Bishopric of Maini, dependent then on the Metropolis of Corinth.⁶ Scattered rural settlements, of medium or small scale, are located on the wider area, forming the residential tissue.

During the Komnenian period a series of quality ecclesiastical edifices are erected in this barren land, already known, in general, to the scholars from the pioneering studies of Traquair and Megaw, although not yet thoroughly studied.⁷ More than half of them are located within a range of less than 10km from the fortress of Maini (fig. 1). They follow the cross-in-square type, in the two or four-columned variant. These churches, few in comparison to the aggregate of contemporary ecclesiastical building, still mark, by their scale and quality, the architectural identity of this specific place and time.

The year 1075 recorded in the inscription of the western tie-beam of Hagioi Theodoroi at Vamvaka, defining the erection of the whole building, makes this church a key monument for the evolutionary process of ecclesiastical architecture in the region.⁸ The tendency towards variety and polychromy attested in the rendering of the windows and the articulation of the drum of the dome, a unique example in the area, the use of cut-brick tiles in individual ornaments and the brickwork in the vault-head arches of the interior vaults, reveal the presence of an experienced and well staffed building workshop, familiar with the current architectural trends in southern Greece (fig. 2, 3).

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⁵ A view held by most scholars, which is reinforced by the archaeological finds in the area, see Avraméa 1998, 55-56; Gkioles 2008-2009, 74-77.
⁶ Mexia 2015, 61-62; on the Bishopric of Maini, see Darrouzès 1981, 53-78, 282, 323, 361.
⁷ Traquair 1908-1909; Megaw 1932-1933. The work of Traquair and Megaw on the maniot monuments was supplemented by the systematic records and publications of the late Nikolaos Drandakis and his colleagues, professors nowadays at the University of Athens, see, for example, Drandakis 1998; Panayotidí 2005.
The scholars suggest a date around the end of the 11th c. for the church of Taxiarchis at Charouda, although the morphological and structural data favor perhaps a later date, in the early 12th c.\(^9\) The size of the edifice, among the largest cross-in-square churches of the peninsula\(^10\), bespeaks the intention and the economic capabilities of the donor. In the articulation of volumes, in the composition of the façades and in the treatment of the external surfaces, the building tradition of southern Greece prevails, with an original “Athenian dome” at the apex, a form never again imitated in the architecture of Mani (fig. 4). The decorated marble cornices and tie-beams in the interior, combined with the lavishly embellished architectural members of the façades, complement the end result.


\(^{10}\) In the semi-complex four-columned variant.
Hagios Nikolaos at Ochia is probably constructed in the mid-12th c.\(^{11}\) The monument is morphologically and structurally related to the above mentioned churches of the late 11th c., but also shares common features with churches dated to the second half of the 12th c., mainly in the articulation of the façades with horizontal elements. Of particular interest are the brick meander friezes on the west side (fig. 5) and the reticulate bands on the side walls, decoration meeting primarily structurally functional requirements, which directly points to the church of Hagia Varvara at Erimos.

![Fig. 5: Ochia, Hagios Nikolaos, west façade](image)

Hagia Varvara, an excellent architectural work comparable to contemporary Helladic monuments, dates from the third quarter of the 12th c.\(^{12}\) The high artistic intentions of the unknown founders are attested in the design of the building, the elegant proportions, the articulation of the volumes, the quality of construction and the organization of the façades with brick friezes, where the tendency toward decoration and variety becomes prevalent (fig. 6, 7). The same spirit is also discerned in the sculptural members, impressive in their abundance, in the wealth of decorative motifs and carving techniques.

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\(^{11}\) Drandakis 2002, 201-6; Bouras and Boura 2002, 259-61, with previous bibliography.  
The evolution of the compositional principles of Hagia Varvara is further attested in the contemporary church of Hagioi Sergios and Vakchos at Kita. The size of the edifice and the contribution of the decorative means to the articulation of the façades lead to an extraordinary style. The large stone blocks in courses on the lower wall surfaces divided by a dentil band from the upper structure, but mainly the checkerboard bands running across the three sides between decorative brickwork and the same motif in parts of the gables and the apse, display compositional virtues and aesthetic concerns evident also in considerably larger monuments of southern Greece during the 12th c. (fig. 8).

At some distance from the aforesaid monuments, in the north-western part of the Mani peninsula, three other related ecclesiastical edifices are encountered; among them Hagios Petros at Megali Kastania, from the third quarter of the 12th c., stands

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out.\textsuperscript{14} Through the opulent treatment of the openings and the layout of the built-in glazed bowls, combined with the application of the cloisonné masonry in the exterior surfaces, the main axes of the building are accentuated (fig. 9). The architectural and liturgical members, especially carved for the building, demonstrate both the skills and the craftsmanship of the marble workers active in the region.

![Fig. 9: Megali Kastania, Hagios Petros, south façade (E. Eleftheriou)](image)

The abundant decorative brickwork, with the extensive use of peculiar ceramic rosettes and the arrangement of the brick tiles in the façades of the church of Metamorphosis at Nomitsi create a picturesque style, differentiating the edifice from the preceding monuments (fig. 10, 11). This pretentious decorative aspect dictates a date around the end of the 12th c. or even into the early years of the 13th c.\textsuperscript{15} The form of the marble screen with the arched architrave and the relief decoration of the architectural members in the interior of the church are in the same vein.

\textsuperscript{14} Mpouza 2010. To the same period we should ascribe the initial building phase of the much altered today cross-in-square church of Hagios Demetrios at the nearby settlement of Platsa, see Drandakis 2002, 123-32.

Returning to the vicinity of the Tigani promontory, the church of Episkopi, located at the settlement of Hagios Georgios, completes the building activity on the threshold of the 13th c. Its erection around 1200 is associated with the powerful local notable Georgios Daimonoyiannis. The containment of the cloisonné in the dome, the way the red marble ashlers are adjusted to the surfaces and the dense layout of the built-in bowls, especially in the west façade, with decorative attitude and emphasis on variegation, herald the morphological options prevailing from the 13th c. onward (fig. 12). Constantinopolitan influences, reaching the place through the nearby castle of Maini, are discerned, mainly in the quality sculptural decoration and the excellent wall paintings, revealing the intensions and financial means of the donor.

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16 Drandakis 2002, 265-75; Bouras and Boura 2002, 128-31, with previous bibliography. The church was initially dedicated to Saint George.
It is more than obvious that the aforementioned churches constitute a cohesive group, which not only in the field of typology, but also in matters of morphology and construction methods, draw from the repertory of the so-called “Helladic School” flourishing during the Komnenian period in mainland Greece.\(^{17}\) In the articulation of volumes and façades, in the rendering of apses, gables and openings, the basic Helladic principles are consistently followed. Although certain refined architectural forms of the elaborate 12th c. churches of southern Greece are absent\(^ {18}\) and despite an obvious relative simplification of the expressive means, the cloisonné masonry, the decorative brickwork, the construction of arches and vaults denote constant contacts with the Helladic building tradition. Moreover, the province of Mani contributes to the shaping of new architectural forms in the realm of the “Helladic School”. The creativity of the local craftsmen is attested in the making of a simplified variant of the “Athenian dome”, widely disseminated since then, with four windows to the axes alternating with an equal number of blind arches. The marble ties with relief decoration at the springing level of the arches of the vaults of the cross arms, consist another new form, primarily decorative, which, however, is not disseminated beyond the borders of the peninsula. The same taste is discerned in the embellished marble slabs used as window partitions.\(^ {19}\) Noteworthy, with regard to designing, is the layout of the vaults between narthex and nave in some monuments, which obviously reflects both the liturgical needs and the aesthetic preferences of the patrons; the barrel vault of the west cross arm of the nave continues unbroken into the central bay of the narthex, thus accentuating the longitudinal axis of the building.\(^ {20}\)

Alongside these ambitious domed buildings, another group of numerous monuments, definitely of lower aspirations, complements church architecture under the Komnenian dynasty. They are located in the western part of the peninsula, at a short distance from the fortress of *Maini* that could be covered on foot (fig. 1).\(^ {21}\) They


\(^ {18}\) For example, marble or stone cornices articulating the exterior surfaces, window frames made of well-cut stones, elaborate elements of decorative brickwork.

\(^ {19}\) Bouras and Boura 2002, 427.

\(^ {20}\) Megaw 1932-1933, 140-41; Bouras and Boura 2002, 349.

\(^ {21}\) The group comprises roughly over 20 monuments: Hagios Georgios at Charia, Hagios Theodoros and Hagia Anna at Kalou, Hagios Ioannes Theologos, Hagia Paraskevi and Hagios Vlasios at Pyrgos Dirou, Hagia Varvara, Hagios Nikolaos and “Dyo Klisidia” at Glezou, Hagios Vasileios at Mandoforos, Hagia Solomoni and Panagia at Triantafyllia, Faneromeni and Hagios Petros (“Petrakis”) at Frangulia, Hagioi Theodoroi at Tsopakas, Hagioi Theodoroi and Hagios Vasileios at Kafiona,
follow the barrel-vaulted single-nave type, the predominant type in the ecclesiastical architecture of Mani throughout the centuries. Despite the limited size and the extremely simple articulation of the volumes, the intention to enhance these churches is more than obvious. The means that are used each time vary. Sometimes, the emphasis is on isolated architectural features, usually the entrances in the main façade of the building or on the application of careful pointing on wall surfaces. In other, more ambitious, cases, there is an evident effort to imitate the construction techniques as well as the methods of façade articulation of the cross-in-square churches, with interesting results, yet the execution, at times with improvisations, has a strongly provincial character.

Namely, the special care given to the entrances is attested in the construction of the relieving arch with well-cut porous voussoirs, framed by beveled cornices and dentil courses, while glazed bowls are occasionally placed round the door (fig. 13).\(^{22}\) Lintels, made of local marble or limestone, impress with their huge dimensions or relief decoration (fig. 14).\(^{23}\)

![Fig. 13: Kafiona, Hagioi Theodori, south door](image1)

![Fig. 14: Gardenitsa, Hagios Ioannes Theologos, west door](image2)

Frequently, the careful formation of the mortar bed in the rubble masonries enhances the appearance of the buildings. Essentially, the applied mortar looks like plaster covering a great part of the wall surface, from where small parts of stone and, sparsely, bricks emerge, leaving only the larger stones, especially of the corners.


\(^{22}\) As in Hagioi Theodori at Kafiona, Hagios Nikolaos at Glezou, Hagios Theodoros at Kalou, Faneromeni at Frangulia.

\(^{23}\) See, for example, the churches of Hagios Ioannes Theologos at Gardenitsa and Hagios Vlasi at Pyrgos Dirou.
uncovered, so as to highlight them (fig. 15). For further improvement of these pointed surfaces, incised architectural forms are applied.\textsuperscript{24} They are irregular horizontal, vertical or oblique lines, single or double, between which, often more complex patterns are formed, such as zigzag, christogram, cross with flaring arms or diamond shaped (fig. 16). The rendering of these decorative etchings, common in almost all the maniot examples, bespeaks temporal proximity and points to common building practices. Indeed, the noteworthy similarity between some monuments, Hagia Varvara and Hagios Nikolaos at Glezou, Hagios Vasileios at Mandoforos and Hagia Solomoni at Triantafyllia, suggest the possibility that these buildings may be viewed as the product of the same workshop, which we would prefer to denote as “the building workshop of Glezou”, given the radius of its activity during the second half of the 12th c. (fig. 17-20).\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{24} On this widespread, during the Byzantine period, practice, see most recently Mamaloukos 2010.

In certain occasions, the wall-faces of a church, or at least a part of them, are sheathed with large dressed or roughly-worked stone blocks, not always in regular courses, functioning as the facing for the rubble core of the structure. The blocks either fit perfectly with each other or between them joints are formed, filled with small stones and brick fragments. This masonry designates some local craftsmen, who we propose to include in the “building workshop of the church of Hagios Ioannes Theologos at Pyrgos Dirou”, based on their most prominent work. Their presence is also attested in the churches of Hagios Vlasios at Pyrgos Dirou, Soulani at Erimos, Hagies Maries at Gardenitsa and Hagios Athanasios at Angeiadaki, dating from the second half of the 12th c. (fig. 21-26). Although completely out of scale compared to the small size of the buildings, the masonry with large ashlars, the local variant of the ashlar masonry so to speak, attaches with simple means an imposing character, revealing that the search for monumentality is primarily connected not with the scale of the architectural work, but with the aesthetic preferences of the patrons and masons.

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26 Ibid., 194, 333-34. The church of Soulani stands a few meters westward of the domed church of Hagia Varvara at Erimos. The coexistence of these two, completely different in terms of scale and construction, contemporary churches, side by side, points to a certain, so far undefined, relationship between them.
A more emphatic effort to implement the principles used in the articulation of the façades of the elaborate domed edifices is observed in few of these single-nave churches.\(^\text{27}\) It is primarily attested in the application of the cloisonné masonry, the most conspicuous Helladic feature, on noticeable parts of their wall-faces, even in a

\(^{27}\) Hagia Varvara and Hagios Nikolaos at Glezou, Hagios Theodoros at Kalou.
relatively careless rendering (fig. 27, 28). Built-in glazed bowls and decorative brickwork, including chiefly geometric figures or characters of the Greek alphabet and dentil courses, enrich the wall surfaces of these monuments, while brick step ornament occurs in one instance, combined with a short frieze of cross pattern and christogram round the main entrance (fig. 27). The checkerboard band running across part of the south side of Hagia Varvara at Glezou and Hagios Theodoros at Kalou (fig. 28) accentuates the façades of the buildings, reminding the example of Hagia Varvara at Erimos, although much more irregularly rendered. The so called “Helladic” school provides the morphological vocabulary for the construction of the windows, especially the few double-light ones. Noteworthy is the placing of bowls on the summit of the arcade windows in the church of Hagios Theodoros at Kalou, indicating the intention of the mason to create a composition similar to that of the grouped-type window (fig. 29). Although the outcome is not completely successful, the attempt to render a more elaborate window type, in current use in the contemporary domed churches of the region, is remarkable.

Fig. 27: Glezou, Hagios Nikolaos, view from SW
Leaving aside the newly erected churches during the Komnenian period, it is important to mention the reconstruction of an antecedent monument, that of the imposing three-aisled basilica excavated at Cape Tigani, most likely the episcopal church of the region (fig. 30, 31). The erection of the church, previously dated to the 7th c., was recently redated to the second half of the 10th or the early 11th c.28 The edifice, with its architectural type, its large size by the standards of middle Byzantine architecture, the morphological and structural features and the rich liturgical equipment, transplants to the Mani peninsula a new architectural style, thus exerting a decisive influence on the local building tradition. In the late 12th c. the basilica is modified, albeit without a drastic transformation of its original architectural type. The freestanding columns supporting the arcades between the aisles are replaced by piers, the western pilasters and the eastern wall-pillars are reinforced with stonemasonries, decreasing the width of the nave. Indicative of the acquaintance of the engaged workshop with the Helladic practices are the pseudokufic decorative elements, rendered with mortar and bearing traces of red color, in parts of the masonry of the basilica, which could probably be ascribed to this building phase (fig. 32).

28 Gkioles 2008-2009; Mexia 2015, with previous bibliography.
The effort to enhance the artistic value of the above mentioned churches, regardless of size and architectural type, is also attested in the wide variety of marble architectural and liturgical members that embellish them, executed by local workshops of sculpture.\(^{29}\) The most important one, designated by the late professor Drandakis, flourishes in the second half of the 11th c. and is represented by the marble-carver Niketas, who signed his name in several cases, a rare and therefore valuable exception

\(^{29}\) For an overall assessment of the local sculptural output, see Drandakis 2002, esp. 331-43.
for the Byzantine era.\textsuperscript{30} This doubtlessly impressive sculptural output in an isolated province of the Byzantine Empire and its distribution in a regional level are not to be adequately ascribed to the sufficiency of raw materials only, but they have to be related to the prevalent socioeconomic conditions, revealing the aesthetic preferences of the maniot society of the time. Indeed, the presence of eponymous marble-workers in the region, as professor Sophia Kalopissi-Verti notes, demonstrates the central role of these local craftsmen in the process of art production, contrary to byzantine practice, and furthermore also attests the relatively small social differentiation between them and the donors, since they are all members of the same rural community.\textsuperscript{31}

Apart from the prominence given to the personalities of marble-carvers, we draw important information on patronage, through the surviving inscriptions concerning donations for the erection of churches or for their marble decoration.\textsuperscript{32} Both clerics and laymen, whose name is not accompanied by any reference to title or office, are mentioned as donors. They are acting as individuals or in collaboration with others, usually their families. Local landowners, collaborating sometimes with priests, seem to undertake the rather ambitious donations for the erection of the cross-in-square churches. In any case the cooperation of three or four persons is required to cover the total cost for the erection and relief decoration of such a church. The absence of civilian or military officials, as well as of any reference to Byzantine emperors, is indicative of the loose relation of the province to the capital.

In conclusion, during the Komnenian period, the Mani peninsula, despite its geographical isolation, follows the architectural trends of the so called “Helladic School”, as one of its local entities. The contacts with the building tradition of southern Greece, a process already in progress during the 11th c.\textsuperscript{33}, are strengthened. The options in terms of typology, as well as in matters of construction and morphology rely mainly on the imported models. The erection of a few quality

\textsuperscript{30} Id. 1972.
\textsuperscript{31} Kalopissi-Verti 2003, 344-45.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} It is noteworthy that the peninsula, already since the first half of the 11th c., assimilates the mainstream of the contemporary Helladic tendencies. By contrast, in Laconia, churches fully assimilating the Helladic practices are encountered, based on the evidence of the surviving monuments, much later, from the mid 12th c. onwards and the same holds true for the rest of the Peloponnese, see Mexia 2011, vol. A’, 343-45.
edifices, such as Taxiarchis at Charouda or Hagia Varvara at Erimos, equivalent to the elaborate Helladic churches, reveals not only the presence of donors with economic capabilities and refined taste, but also of generations of well-trained craftsmen who respond successfully to relatively complex building programs. The workshops, however, incorporate selectively from the Helladic repertory, without fully keeping up with the current developments, nevertheless even timidly contributing to the renewal of the architectural creation.

The assimilation and dissemination of the Helladic features is even more obviously attested, I believe, in the improvement of the constructional level and the evolution in morphological issues observed in the barrel-vaulted single-nave churches of the peninsula. As the always present local building tradition retreats, workshops of narrow scope actualize limited scale projects, selectively incorporating morphological features of the more ambitious building programs of the cross-in-square churches, which they yield in their own way. The intention of enhancing these churches characterizes the ecclesiastical architecture of the Komnenian period, testifying that the new architectural trends not only address a small number of donors, but also spread wider in the rural society of Mani. The importance of this phenomenon is further accentuated by the fact that in the following century the self-contained local architectural tradition comes to the foreground stronger once again\textsuperscript{34}, with the erection of small single-nave buildings, without any consideration for the treatment of the façades; churches of higher aspirations continue to exist, although now in a much more simplified form.

The ample architectural activity and the quality works produced during the Komnenian dynasty bespeak the density and the prevalent prosperity of the population in the rural settlements of the peninsula. The proximity of the monuments to the castle of Maini confirms its prevailing role as the center where the new architectural style is formed and from where the innovative trends and the new aesthetic perceptions are diffused.

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\textsuperscript{34} Mexia forthcoming.
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