

Peristeriones (Περιστεριώνες), the typical pigeon houses in Sifnos Island (Cyclades, Greece)

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ABSTRACT This work takes into consideration the characteristic dovecotes of the Cycladic island of Sifnos. Their great importance that they had in the past for the agriculture of the island and the current architectural feature are analyzed.

KEY WORDS *Columba livia*; pigeon breeding; Sifnos.

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INTRODUCTION

Agriculture was in ancient times a source of great wealth for the island of Sifnos (Cyclades, Greece). The hilly and steep terrain has been transformed into small stepped terraces cultivated with the typical crops of the Aegean islands' landscapes, such as cereals, vegetables, olive trees and vineyards (Vernicos, 1990; Kizos & Koulouri, 2006; Petanidou et al., 2008). During the last four decades, many of these terraces have been abandoned (Tzanopoulos & Vogiatzakis, 2011). These abandonments were due to the severe drought that characterizes this island; the lack of water has damaged even the most resistant crops. The considerable presence in this island of dovecotes, here called Peristeriones (Περιστεριώνες) (Figs. 1-4), confirms the great need to have fresh fertilizer available for crops. A variety of dovecotes can be observed in several regions in the world. The differences between them reflect varying cultural interpretations and social strategies of adaptation to the environment (Bekleyen, 2009). The Peristeriones of Sifnos, similar to others from other Cycladic islands, are located in river valleys, and mostly in the area between Apollonia, Artemonas and Pano Petali.

STUDY AREA

Sifnos Island (Greece) is situated in the southwest of the Cyclades Archipelago, at 37° N latitude and 24.7° E longitude. It is a small mountainous island with steep slopes and relatively few plains, with an area of 81.1 km², and a maximum altitude of 681 m a.s.l. The traditional settlements of the island are situated in the inland (Apollonia, Artemonas, Katavati, Exambela, Pano and Kato Petali), as well as on the coast (Kamares, Kastro, Faros, Herronissos). The climate can be defined as Mediterranean, with mild, short winters and warm, dry summers. Rainfall is scarce and is restricted to the period from October to March. The total annual amount of rainfall is 385 mm (Bougiatioti & Oikonomou, 2008).

The landscape is a mixture of semi-natural vegetation, poorly cultivated or abandoned terraces and picturesque Cycladic-style villages. The semi-natural vegetation of the island is a mixture of maquis (community of *Juniperus phoenicea*) and phrygana (community of *Sarcopoterium spinosum* and *Coridothymus capitatus*) (Tzanopoulos et al., 2005, 2007). Currently there are no fresh water courses.

DISCUSSION

The Rock Dove or Wood Pigeons *Columba livia* Gmelin, 1789 is a polytypic species originally confined to coastal and inland cliffs of western Palaearctic and northern Ethiopian regions and to those of Indian subcontinent. The present distribution is influenced by extensions of range through hybridization with feral stock, which have determined its diffusion in geographical areas and environments that are very different and distant from the original ones, with a naturalized distribution now virtually cosmopolitan (Boano et al., 2018). Points of archaeological evidence are the human use of pigeons as food source already in the Pleistocene (~10,000 years ago) in the Fertile Crescent, even if that involved domestication is not known. Ancient Egyptians began to use pigeons for ceremonial and culinary purposes at least 4000 years ago and after as precursors of the progress of the Nile's annual flood. The temporal origins of many other fantasy races are lost in antiquity, but the ancient geographic centres of it seems that the diversity of domestic pigeons be the Middle East and South Asia (India and Pakistan). Furthermore, the birds were

exchanged between these two regions in the 16th Century (and probably even earlier), providing wide possibility of hybridization between races. Writings of 16th Century and earlier discuss derivative morphological and behavioural traits and races that persist today. In Europe, the popularity of the pigeon as a pet increased significantly in 17th Century, and artistic representations of some domestic breeds of this era already closely resemble modern forms. Pigeons have played a very important role in history as messengers. For example, the Egyptians would release pigeons in order to announce, to the people, the rise of a new pharaoh. The Greeks used carrier pigeons to release the results of the Olympic Games and to send messages about victories in their battle fields. Frontinus, the Roman writer, talks about the use of carrier pigeons by Julius Caesar. There are documents about the existence of the columbarium in Rome that contained over 5000 pigeons. The use of carrier pigeons was so well known in the 1800s that many people believed it was the carrier pigeon, in 1815 that brought the message of Napoleon's defeat in the battle of Waterloo to Nathan Rothschild, 3 days before Wellington's human messenger. A few years later, however, pigeons were used by the



Figure 1. The dovecotes (Peristeriones) near Apollonia, Sifnos Island (Cyclades, Greece).

young Reuters Agency to communicate stock exchange information between Germany and Belgium. In later centuries, pigeons played an important role in Western Europe, particularly during both World Wars. In World War 1, they were used by the British Intelligence Service as a method of maintaining contact with sympathisers and resistance movements in enemy-occupied territory. In one method used, batches of pigeons, each with its own body-harness and parachute, were jettisoned from an aeroplane and released at intervals by a clockwork mechanism. On landing, risks to the birds were considerable and while many perished, several returned with essential messages. In the World War 1, a portable pigeon home was created in order to accompany the soldiers to the front. This enabled them to send messages almost instantly. It is known that the French espionage service used carrier pigeons to send messages to and from their agents behind the lines. One of the most famous carrier pigeons of the First World War was “Cher Ami” that saved around 200 American soldiers. Despite injuries inflicted by the German army, this little pigeon managed to get its message to the Allies in time to save the soldiers and the pigeon quickly

became a symbol of heroism. Today its stuffed body can be seen in the Smithsonian Institute in United State.

The Columbarium

Doves are the uninvited guests of all human-built structures. The presence of doves, unlike that of other wild animals, does not startle human beings. On the contrary, people think of these birds as an inevitable part of their surroundings. In some parts of the world, doves have been kept in specially designed buildings either to obtain meat or to collect manure, a natural fertiliser. Dovecotes, which have been constructed in such varied parts of the world, such as Europe, North Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, are part of the historical and cultural heritage of these areas, due to the unremarkable appearance and the variety of their construction materials. Although their functional characteristics are similar, dovecotes in different parts of the world have different names, forms and construction techniques. Depending on location and period, a dovecote may be known as a columbarium, colombier, culvery, doocot, pigeon



Figure 2. The dovecotes (Peristeriones) near Artemonas, Sifnos Island (Cyclades, Greece).

cote or pigeon tower (Bekleyen, 2008). The great demand for pigeons resulted in a lucrative occupation for those who bred and sold the pigeons. The habit of sacrificing was a common practice in the ancient world. At that time, human sacrifice was experienced in Central America by some tribes in Africa and some ancient tribes in Europe like the Germans and Kelts. In ancient Greece, human sacrifice was a practice in order to appease the gods. This was a practice also in Egypt and Mesopotamia, in times of crisis. The Bible condemned human sacrifice and called for a substitute, as clearly indicated in the story of Abraham and Isaac. According to the Biblical laws of sacrifices, it is imperative that sacrifice should only be of small cattle, goats and sheep or of a pure fowl-bird. Pigeons fit this last category. Moreover, they had an advantage over the other options because they were easy to breed. Therefore, they fulfilled at least two basic needs: they served as a source of food and as acceptable sacrifice. As a result, a flourishing industry developed for breeding pigeons. Hundreds of ancient columbaria have been found in Israel, a few dozens of them in and around the city of Jerusalem. Most of them were built in manufactured caves. The others were built

above the ground in the form of towers. These were found in the City of David, Jericho, Masada, Herodium and in other cities in Israel, dating back to the Hellenistic and early Roman periods. Columbaria can also be found in many places around the world: England, Scotland, Wales, France, central Europe, Italy, etc. It is possible that the Romans introduced the practice into the conquered areas. In medieval times, raising pigeons was often considered the right of nobility and, as a result, you can find dovecotes that are still standing beside their castles. Dovecotes have served for the collection of pigeon droppings, widely used in agriculture, and have also enabled pigeon meat to be presented for human consumption, excluding the nesting period of the species. Therefore, pigeons have been appraised as animals of economic value by local people (Özen, 2012).

The Peristeriones of Sifnos

The Peristeriones of Sifnos are small buildings built of stone, often painted white like all Cycladic houses, with two rectangular sides, as a rule three meters wide, three meters long and about five me-



Figure 3. The dovecotes (Peristeriones) near Pano Petali, Sifnos Island (Cyclades, Greece).

ters high (Figs. 1–4). On the upper floor, the pigeons live and below the farmer, who uses the space as a hayloft, has a fireplace, a winepress, lockers for his oil bottles and tools. The Peristeriones were built in ravines or slopes sheltered from strong winds, to favour the free flight of pigeons and always close to water sources. They have a small door on the north side. The pigeon storey inside has stone hatches on the walls, where the birds nest. Externally it is decorated with recesses in the shape of a triangle, square, rhombus or circle and never face north. Of these, however, only two-three lead to the inside of the dovecote, so that cats, mice and snakes, the enemies of pigeons, are not easily accessible. When pigeons come out of the loft, their vision does not immediately adjust from dark to light. Therefore, they have to sit somewhere, until they come to their senses. They have made these recesses for protection so that the wind does not hit them. All decorative forms are made with local slate and are the places where the pigeons could rest, sheltered from the sun, rain and wind. Some Peristeriones have sticks wedged into the walls. There, the males climb up and make their figures to excite the females. Pigeon breeding in

the Greek islands is a habit inherited from the Venetians. They carried their pigeons with them wherever they went. It is estimated that the first dovecotes were built during the Venetian period (1207–1715), according to official written records, dating back to 1726. According to an unwritten law, in fact, only Venetians had the privilege to breed pigeons and be owners of Peristeriones. They were a symbol of noble origin and economic power. Only the very wealthy and landowners could afford to build and maintain such buildings. The more elaborate its ornaments, the richer the owner was considered. After the Venetians left, the dovecotes were given to the locals. The Peristeriones in addition to allowing the breeding of pigeons had another great use: manure was considered the best fertilizer for the arid Sifnian earth. During the Venetian domination it was taken by whoever kept the dovecote, as it was payment.

CONCLUSIONS

Today there are about 65 pigeon houses in Sifnos, most of them abandoned, others trans-



Figure 4. The dovecotes (Peristeriones) of Sifnos (Cyclades, Greece).

formed into rented accommodation and only a very few still used for pigeon breeding. Most of these are present in the area between Apollonia, Artemonas and Pano Petali. Unfortunately, the abandonment of agriculture due to the scarce rainfall and the lack of active waterways, has led to the end of the use of the pigeon houses. The Peristeriones, however, influenced the architecture of Sifnos in general, so much, so that today it is possible to see some modern houses built in the same way or showing the typical triangles as decorative elements. The Peristeriones remain unique masterpieces and in many ways are the characteristic features of the island of Sifnos.

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