

## The appropriation of traditional houses in Imbros/Gökçeada

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the transformation of locality in relation to vernacular architecture on the former Greek island of Imbros (Gökçeada) in Turkey. The people of Imbros were forced to leave their homeland due to a state-initiated policy of Turkification that started in the early 1960s. The structural evolution of the traditional Imbriot House came to a halt due to the forced immigration of the Imbrian people. Today, the material remains of houses in villages contribute to heritage capital, while allowing returnees a chance to critically reflect on their tangible heritage. The paper aims to understand changes in the built environment and its cultural and historical contexts and records the contemporary architectural applications of the social transition of a rural community in a global age. The study shows how traditional houses are 'modernized' by 2nd and 3rd generation returnees of the Imbrian community, in line with the changing needs of their inhabitants, and questions how the local identity is reproduced by the heritage community. By analysing the spatial modifications of the typologies and the construction adaptation of the buildings, the study examines which architectural components are kept and/or changed in order to preserve the "local identity" in everyday life on the island today. The paper compiles preliminary findings based on ethnographic field research conducted in 2018-2019, which yielded qualitative data from oral narratives and participatory observations, and also uses the data obtained from architectural research tools. Focusing on the reconstruction of old houses by returnees from the Imbrian community, this paper showcases the appropriation of vernacular architecture in a contested area in relation to locality.*

**Keywords:** vernacular architecture; locality; local community; people-centred heritage practices.

### 1. Introduction

Together with the neighbouring islands of Thasos, Samothrace, Limnos and Tenedos, Imbros is part of the unit known as Thracian Sporades (Fig.1). Located near the entrance to the Dardanelles, Imbros has been a part of a well-connected network of cultural, social and material exchange and played a strategic geo-political role throughout history.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1. Imbros in the INT Nautical Chart of the Aegean Sea.

<sup>1</sup> The ancient name of the island was Ἰμβρος (Imbros or Imvros), but it was called Imroz under Ottoman rule before the Turkish state renamed the island Gökçeada in 1970. The Greeks of the island refer to the island as Imvros and

describe themselves as Imvrii, or Imvriotes. As a sign of respect for their self-identification practices, in my research I use the original name "Imbros" for the island and "Imbriot/Imvrii" for the Greek people of the island.

In the aftermath of WWI, the 1923 Lausanne Treaty recognized the borders of the Republic of Turkey and defined the two Aegean Islands – Imbros and Tenedos – in Turkish territory. Articles 14 and 40 of the Treaty declared an "autonomous" status for both these islands and demanded that Turkey guarantee the protection of the religious and cultural affairs of the Greek minorities on the islands under its rule. However, in the nation-building processes of Turkey, the Imbrian sense of belonging based on locality was considered a misfit to the homogenous identity constructions of twentieth century nation-states (Babül, 2006; Halstead, 2009). The people of Imbros have undergone long-term strategies of oppression, othering and discrimination under national policies. By all accounts, until the 1960s, coexistence between the 8,000 Greeks and less than 300 Muslims on the island of Imbros was relatively peaceful (Alexandris, 1980). However, this changed with the rising of Greco-Turkish conflicts in Cyprus in 1963, coinciding with unrest in Imbros (Tsimouris, 2001). Although the Imvrii had no organic connections to the Cypriots, their Greco-Christian ethnic identity labeled them as allies of the Cypriots and as a potential threat to the Turkish nation (Alexandris, 2004).

From 1964 to 1974 the Turkish State embarked upon a strict restructuring programme of 'Turkification' on Imbros. The establishment of a military battalion in 1964 defined the island as a frontier territory and acted as physical evidence of the annulment of the autonomous status granted by the Lausanne Treaty. This was followed by discriminatory measures, such as the closure of Greek schools on the island, which directly affected Greek families and prompted their first large migration wave. In 1965, the state expropriated 90% of Greek population farmland to build a state farm, the State Production Farm – Devlet Üretim Çiftliği (DÜÇ). In 1966, a semi-open prison with a capacity of 1,000 inmates was established to provide the manpower needed

on state-built farms. Accounts from the Imbrian side accuse state officials of overlooking the free entry of convicted criminals into Greek villages, which led to increased crime and unrest in the community. Eventually, various acts of violence encouraged by the ultra-nationalist Turkish politics of the time forced the native islanders to leave their homeland.

In 1970, a government decree renamed the island as *Gökçeada*, replacing Greek toponyms with Turkish ones. Strategies such as topographical renaming, cadastral re-mapping and regulative re-zoning of the island (eg. heritage sites and conservation areas) have followed the expropriation of the land of Imbrian people, disrupting their everyday lives and their livelihood practices in the land. In this regard, the Imvrii felt that the conservation acts of the 1980s, which established their fields and villages as conservation areas, were instrumental in allowing the state to expropriate and monitor their properties. They perceived the heritage regulations as constraints for the further development of the community and argued that, other than binding construction restrictions, there were no concrete guidelines for conservation. This perception was further strengthened by the state-initiated construction of new settlements in the conservation areas, bypassing the law (Ercan, 2020). From 1980 onwards, thousands of Anatolian mainlanders were moved against their will to these new settler villages, drastically altering the demographics of the island. While the Turkish population gradually reached 8,000, there were about 300 elderly Greeks left on the island (Tsimouris, 2011).

In the early 1990s, the military status of the island was rescinded and the open prison was closed definitively in 1992. The island was declared a first degree development area and advertised as a site of tourist attraction. This shift to tourism encouraged the transnational diaspora community to return to the island for

the annual Panagyri<sup>2</sup> celebrations and to reclaim their expropriated properties during their visit (Tsimouris, 2014).

In the early 2000s, during the economic crisis in Greece, Imbrian associations promoted the homecoming project which provided financial support to expatriates wishing to re-settle in Imbros. The re-opening of Greek schools in 2013 and 2015 guaranteed the return of families with children. In the last decade, the number of Greek returnees has increased to 550. However, only some Imvrii have settled back in their old stone houses in villages, as most returnees prefer to live in a more urban environment and have rented apartments in the centre of Gökçeada. The rural houses were heavily damaged, destroyed or in a dilapidated condition.

Although the material remains of the houses provide accurate data on early typologies and traditional construction techniques, they are not sufficient to reconstruct them to their original condition. Today's builders on the island (mostly Turkish or Kurdish settlers) simply do not have local knowledge of traditional construction techniques. Also, the agricultural lifestyle of the Imvrii has changed in essence and their experience in large cities has led to greater urbanization. Furthermore, most Imvrii could not afford to rebuild or restore rural houses. Therefore, the modernization of dwellings is considered critical to the continuation of a living community. In this context, Imbros is a contested heritage site, struggling between conservation of the past and the functioning of everyday life today.

In an examination of the “Imbriotic House”, introduced as vernacular architecture of Imbros by Pasadaios (Πασαδαιού, 1973), this study focuses on the structural modifications of traditional houses made by returnees in an attempt to understand the re-appropriation of local architecture by the Imbrian community. It shows

how local identity is produced through people-centred heritage practices in a material world in the age of globalization.

## 2. Methodology

The preliminary findings detailed in this paper and based on ethnographic field research conducted in 2018-2019 have yielded qualitative data from biographical narratives and participatory observations as well as data obtained from architectural tools (sketches, photography, drawings, etc.). Following an inductive methodology, ero-epic conversations, and semi-structured interviews with key informants in the community helped to establish criteria for case studies. The data collected via group interviews conducted in collaboration with scholars from other disciplines in the field were cross-referenced. This interdisciplinary interpretation method provided a multi-layered understanding of the research subject. Further qualitative methods such as “thinking aloud” and “walking interviews” with local residents of Imbros were helpful for understanding the native perspective on landscape as well as on local houses. Individual homeowners gave tours of their houses, detailing the past uses, modifications and present uses of the dwellings. Additionally, a literature review of historical records for Imbros and detailed archival research were conducted at the Imbros Association in Athens and at Imbros Union in Thessaloniki.

## 3. The “Imbriotic House”

Pasadaios (1973) put together a detailed inventory of local architecture in Imbros and coined the term “Imbriotic House.” He linked the historical and regional origins of the local houses to the rural Thracian houses in the mountains on the one hand, and their characteristic architectural components to those of mainland Anatolian tradition on the other. His study was based on an accurate analysis of a sample house named after its owner, *Koutoufous*, enabling a deep understanding of the spatial organization of the rural community of a certain period.

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<sup>2</sup>to Panagyri (το Παναγήρι): (to Panagyri tis Panaghias) is the biggest Greek-Orthodox religious festivity celebrated on 15th of August for the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.

Koutoufus' house was a rectangular stone house with a north-south orientation. It was built on two floors, each of which consisted of a single room. Pasadaios defined this single-room house as belonging to the *monospiti*<sup>3</sup> typology.

The ground floor (Fig. 2), named *katoe*, was used for storage or as an atelier for the professional activities of the owner. The upper floor, called *anoe*, was the family residence, where everyday life took place. Each floor had a separate entrance and the residential unit was only accessible via a *petraskala*, an exterior staircase. The stone walls of the *katoe*, around one metre thick, provided the cool and humidity free environment necessary to preserve household supplies. There were no windows — just a small opening called *thyr'daki* on the east wall for ventilation. Big clay amphorae with a diameter of 100-150 cm and a capacity of 150-400 litres for olive oil or wine were buried

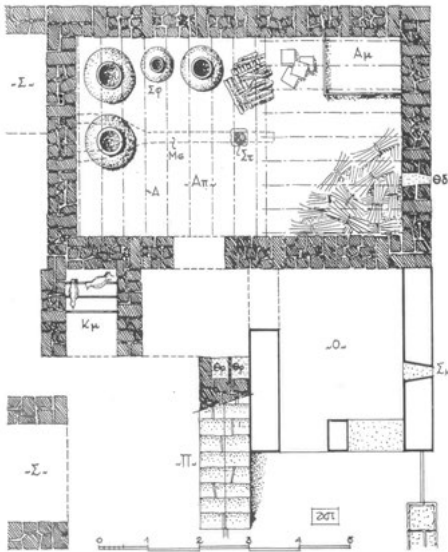


Fig 2. Koutoufus' House: Katoe (Source: Pasadaios, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Gr.(pl.) *mono-spiti*; translated as single houses, descriptive of the single-room typology.

halfway in the ground during the construction of the foundations. In most cases, the floor of the *katoe* was covered with treated soil or with stone and slates as a continuation of the courtyard floor. The *katoe* had a very low door with a maximum height of 1.80 m, the same distance as between the ceiling beam (*misodoki*) and the earthen floor. The wooden container, *ambandi*, was used to store olives, while other traditional items, such as wooden troughs called *skafes*, were placed and stored in the *katoe*.

In the *anoe* (Fig. 3), a single step of 10-20 cm called *seki* divided the upper floor into two levels: the upper house and the lower house. In Imbros the lower house is known as the *papoutslouki*<sup>4</sup>, a place where occupants take off and set aside their shoes before washing their hands at a rectangular ewer-stand or *laenoustat* (Λ) holding a jug of water. The upper house, used as a sitting and dining area in the daytime and as a place to lay down sleeping mattresses at night, is accessed with no shoes on.

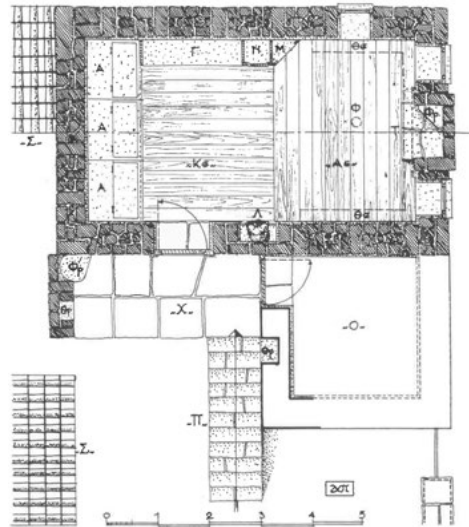
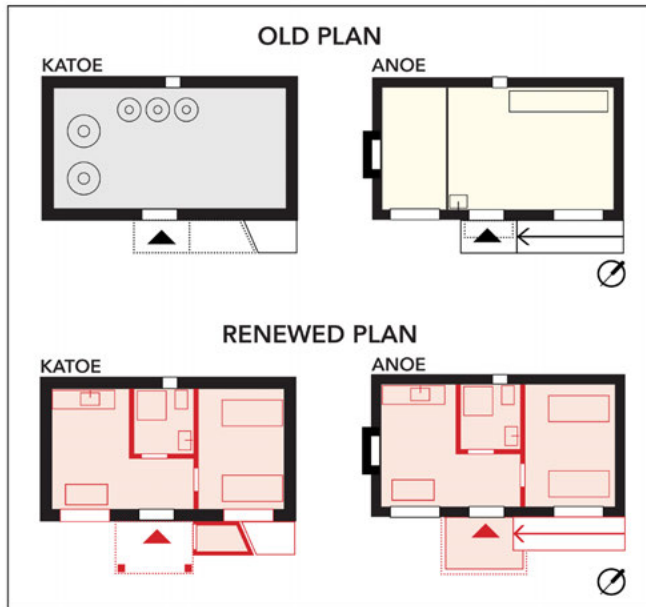


Fig 3. Koutoufus' House: Anoe (Source: Pasadaios, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Architectural terms derived from Turkish and some from ancient Greek which only exist in the Imbrian dialect. In this case; gr. *Papoutslouki* derives from the Turkish word *Pabuçluk*, meaning, "place to put shoes" (Tzavaras, 2011).



Drawing 1. One case study: The House of Agathe — drawn by the author.

The furnace was placed on the east-facing wall and was used for heating and cooking. The fittings traditionally found in the *anoe* were a large wooden cupboard, *goukeri*, for the storage of all belongings, including mattresses, as well as a granary or *ambari*, and a *thesi*, a wooden shelf on the furnace for ingredients.

#### 4. Returnees' Houses

The Superior Council for the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Property designated old Greek villages as conservation sites under the category of 'urban site' of the second degree in 1991.<sup>5</sup> These regulations prioritized 'preserving the historic architectural and urban fabric of Imbros' and allowed the interiors of the houses to be transformed. It was stipulated that the materials and forms used in the reconstruction of local houses should be compatible with the initial building structures. These conservation regulations, which were perceived as restrictions to the further development of

villages, were viewed as a state-monitoring instrument for property issues within the Imbrian community. As the Imbrian practices of locality transformed, they manifested in the social organization and materiality of the built environment, especially vernacular architecture.

After examining more than eight reconstruction projects in Greek villages, the case study selection depended on the typology being equivalent to the traditional houses described by Pasadaios. Other criteria required the homeowners to be natives — born and raised on the island — who had emigrated abroad and returned to settle back into their childhood homes. After years of living in apartments in the cities, the returnees sought the living standards to which they were accustomed. Some Imvrii were fiercely opposed to the image of the "peasant community" as the experience of migration had led to the formation of a fragmented community of the transnational diaspora. Their urbanized habits and desire for comforts of modern technologies were also embodied in the constructional and structural modifications of the rural houses (Drawing 1).

<sup>5</sup> Decision no. 1932, 15th August 1991

When rebuilding their old homes, the returnees seemed to follow a series of unsystematic practices. The first major change observed in these traditional homes was the adjustment to the scale of the interiors. The room height on the first floor previously used for storage, 1.80~2.00 m, was considered unsuitable for residential use by the returning owners. As a result, in the reconstruction, floor heights were raised to 2.20~2.50 m, a scale similar to city apartments. In addition, the upper floor was extended by lifting the roof construction approximately 30~40 cm and adding three to four rows of bricks to the masonry walls, whereas the ground floor was dug about 30~40 cm into the earth on the ground to increase the inner volume. As these actions did not affect the external appearance of the houses much, they were easily permitted.

The second change made was the integration of modern sanitary facilities, such as closed bathrooms and modern kitchen layouts. These modern installations were an essential requirement of the returnees. Therefore, the one-room houses were now divided into rooms fulfilling different functions, and occupants got their own private individual bedrooms. As a result, the one-room layout of the Imbriotic House changed completely and the indoors lost its hybrid function. Local houses could no longer be described as belonging to the *monospiti* typology.

Newly added interior rooms required the modification of the original stone façades. Some openings, such as windows and doors, were added and directly incorporated on the construction site, resulting in a variety of geometrical forms which veered away from the more traditional ones. Building permits for new features such as these were considered problematic, but were permitted as long as they did not aesthetically impair the unity of the texture. With these changes, the house was legally registered and physically connected to a state-monitored grid infrastructure system, including power lines, water and sewer systems, and satellite antennas. By gaining these

technical installations the local house lost its self-sufficient character and became interconnected with global networks.

All these modern installations were produced with industrial materials. In addition, sandstone masonry was bonded using cement mortar; the handmade clay tiles were replaced with industrial tiles; and old clay chimneys were covered with manufactured tin pots. Old furnaces were often converted into decorative electric fireplaces and all wooden windows replaced with imitation wood plastic window frames. For outdoor furniture, the Imvrii chose plastic chairs and tables that were 'easy to clean' and 'cheap to replace.'

In addition to this modernization process, the Imvrii have also preserved numerous inherited artefacts and the material remains of the old houses. Traditional architectural components and items of the past were deliberately collected, repurposed and integrated into daily settings. Some old items were refurbished and put on display for decoration in the houses, whereas others were recycled or up-cycled. In short, they actively fulfilled multiple secondary functions. For example, an old wine amphora could be refurbished and modified to become a barbecue grill in a garden while an old loom spindle was re-assembled as a towel rack and placed in the new bathroom. Pre-industrial items were utilized as mnemonic traces of the past that assembled a memory network in the present (Hodder, 2012).

Artefacts and architectural components of the past were entwined with everyday life settings in an attributive manner (Jones, 2007; Harrison, Schofield, 2016); they provided material settings for references which nurtured the collective memories of social groups, strengthening their narratives in the construction of their identities and communities' sense of belonging to the place (Halbwachs, 1950).

## 5. Conclusions

This study examines the island of Imbros' transformation of locality in a historical and



socio-political framework that is inseparable from its built environment. The re-making of local architecture by the native community primarily depends on the political and economic context of a larger network in a globalized age. The recent disruption of everyday life caused by the ultra-nationalist politics of the sovereign state, initiated a conscious sense of place (Tuan, 1980) and a desire for heritage among the Imbrian community. Today the returnees have the opportunity of “re-constructing home” in a critical way of heritage-making.

The case of Imbros resembles a contested heritage site that struggles between conservation regulations of the nation state and the continuity of local life in today’s reality. Smith (2006) and Waterton’s concept of an ‘authorized heritage discourse’ from their book *Uses of Heritage* could be used to further analyze this native gaze. The appropriation practices of the native community are considered as people-centered heritage-making that shows how the multi-temporality of place is created in physical settings. The place becomes a palimpsest in a processual re-making by those who, in creative and interpretative ways, carefully integrate the traces of the past in an attributive manner in the present and retain them for the future (Lowenthal, 1985).

The research calls attention to the temporality of the concept of vernacular architecture — as a snapshot of a structural organisation of a society in a certain period — and it frames the idea of heritage as a processual, creative, social process, rather than a merely focus on material conservation (Ashworth, Graham, 2007; Harrison, 2013). This perspective enables heritage to be understood as a correlational multiplicity that evolves in its social (immaterial) and physical (material) environments.

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