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Tsakonia as Seen by Travellers

From Antiquity to the 19th Century

ABSTRACT: Tsakonia is a region in Greece, situated within the borders of the modern municipalities of North and South Kynouria. The local population speaks a distinct language, Tsakonian, which is believed to have evolved from Ancient Doric. From the 1st to the 17th century, there was a dearth of knowledge regarding the region. While Byzantine sources make brief mention of Tsakonia and the Tzacones or Tzecones [Τζάκωνες/Τζέκωνες], an elite Byzantine military unit, there are no descriptions of the local landscape, people, or language. In the 17th century, travellers began to visit Tsakonia, recording their observations in writing. These accounts, which range from admiration of the region's healthy air and robust population to ridicule of the local attire, provide insight into the perceptions of Tsakonia held by these visitors. In the present paper, I will examine various travel descriptions of Tsakonia, including those by Pausanias (Ancient Greek), Evliya Çelebi (Ottoman), William Martin Leake (English), and Jean-Baptiste Gaspard d'Ansse de Villoison and François-René de Chateaubriand (French). In addition to these primary sources, I will also examine a few minor mentions, including those by Martin Crusius and Bernard Randolph. My aim is to shed light on the perception of Tsakonia, particularly on the concept of 'Tsakonia' itself and on the travelers' observations regarding the region's geography, the character of its people and language.

KEYWORDS: Tsakonia, Peloponnese, travel writing, history of Tsakonia, perception of Tsakonia, sources on Tsakonia

1. Introduction

Tsakonia is a region in the Peloponnese in modern-day Greece, now encompassing 12 villages and a single small town.¹ The locals speak Tsakonian (~4000 native speakers, estimates vary²), a highly divergent dialect of Modern Greek or, rather, a separate language, considered to have evolved from Ancient Doric. The first descriptions of modern Tsakonia can only be dated back to the second half of the 17th century, when Evliya Çelebi, an Ottoman traveller, visited the region and described the landscape and people in his *Seyahâtname*, also including a sampling of Tsakonian words. Earlier works (more so on Laconia than Tsakonia³) can be dated as far back as the 1st century AD to Pausanias' *Description of Greece*.

Although present-day Tsakonia is part of the larger Kynouria region (made up of two municipalities, North and South Kynouria), when described by travellers and historians its reach varies significantly, sometimes as far south as the towns of Vatika and Monemvasia on the coast of the Laconian Gulf and as far north as Nafplio. This makes it significantly more difficult to trace the migrations of Tsakonians as well as the extent of an area where their language was spoken.

In this paper, I will focus on descriptions made by various travellers (Ancient Greek – Pausanias; Ottoman – Evliya Çelebi; English – William Martin Leake; French – Jean-Baptiste Gaspard d'Ansse de Vilvoison, François-René de Chateaubriand) with minor mentions deemed valuable to be included here (presented by Martin Crusius, Bernard Randolph), especially regarding the local landscape, the Tsakonian

¹ The town is called Λεωνίδιο [Leōnídio], the villages: Βασκίνα [Vaskína], Πραγματευτής [Pragmateytís], Σαμπατική [Sampatikí], Λιβιάδι [Livádi], Τυρός [Tyrós], Μέλανα [Mélana], Σαπουνακαίικα [Sapoynakáika], Παλαιόχωρα [Palaióchōra], Άγιος Ανδρέας [Ágios Andréas], Καστάνιτσα [Kastánitsa], Σίταινα [Sítaina], Πραστός [Prastós]. In this article, I will refer to the region encompassing these places as 'Tsakonia proper', as a point of comparison with the varying 'Tsakonias' of the analysed authors.

² Cf. Campbell, Belew 2018: 147; Nicholas 2019: 19; Eberhard, Simons, Fennig 2024.

³ The names, while highly similar on the surface level, are most likely not related, cf. Кисилиер 2014 for a more detailed survey. Since the name is not the main subject of this paper, I will not dwell on it any longer.

people, and their language. In doing so, I will examine common denominators – that is, what travellers notice in the region most often as well as what they mean by ‘Tsakonia’ (or how they refer to it). Furthermore, I will analyse their personal perception of the region, whether it was positive or negative. It has to be noted at this point that the paper does not claim to be exhaustive or definitive – the analysis focuses on selected texts,⁴ aiming to provide the reader with an account on general tendencies and observations.

Although there is no single holistic work on travellers in Tsakonia, some of the descriptions were analysed by individually, cf. e.g. the translation and introduction to Evliya Çelebi’s report on his visit to the Peloponnese by Thanasis Kostakis,⁵ as well as other translations of the traveller’s descriptions of Greece in general,⁶ a deeper analysis based on the original text in Ottoman Turkish;⁷ an analysis of the migrations of the Tsakonians and the historical extent where Tsakonian was spoken by Nicholas,⁸ who adduces many examples from chronicles and, among others, Evliya Çelebi; a short article on the rediscovery of Tsakonian by Villoison;⁹ an analysis of historical sources on the Tsakonians (regarding mostly, but not exclusively, the elite Byzantine forces, the Tzecones)¹⁰ and of the extent of Tsakonia in the times of the golden bull of Theodoros II Palaiologos and, once again, Evliya Çelebi’s visit;¹¹ a translation of Chateaubriand’s coverage of his travel-

⁴ E.g. the famous Tsakonian poet Kostas Ouranis has been excluded on purpose, as I believe his references and descriptions of the region merit a more careful analysis in a separate paper. Similarly, the chronicles mentioning Tsakonians and Tsakonia (Chronicle of Monemvasia, Chronicle of Morea, Chronicle of Constantine Porphyrogenitus) have also not been analysed here.

Furthermore, recently a new source on Tsakonian has been found (Μανωλέσσου, Παντελίδης 2023), the travel diary of the Swedish archaeologist Johan David Åkerblad (1763–1819) who stayed in Hydra in the 1790s and talked to the local Tsakonians. Since this source is unavailable to me, I will not analyse it in this paper.

⁵ Κωστάκης 1981.

⁶ Τσελεμπί 1991; Τσελεμπί 1999.

⁷ Arısoy 2018; the article also mentions other Ottoman sources on Tsakonia.

⁸ Nicholas 2019.

⁹ Famerie 2007.

¹⁰ Caratzas 1976: 39–129.

¹¹ Caratzas 1976: 349–353.

sin Kynouria¹² and Leake's detailed account of Tsakonia.¹³ Since the scientific community has been mostly focusing on the Tsakonian language and not the region itself, the non-linguistic bibliography is scarce in comparison. For an analysis of the current state of Tsakonian studies (albeit mostly from a linguistic point of view) see a detailed article by Nikos Liosis¹⁴

Pausanias

The first description of the region can be found in Pausanias' *Description of Greece*¹⁵ (3.24.3–5), where he refers to a city called Brasiae (Βρασιαί)¹⁶ which encompasses today's Παραλίο Λεωνίδι [Paralío Leōnίδι],¹⁷ also called Πλάκα [Pláka].¹⁸ Three geographical features are mentioned by Pausanias: a cave, a plain, and a promontory. The locals 'show the **cave** where Ino nourished Dionysus and call the **plain** the garden of Dionysus' (3.24.4). There also 'is a small **promontory** at Brasiai, calmly projecting into the sea, on which stand bronze figures (...) they are three in number, and the fourth is the statue of Athena' (3.24.5). The cave is possibly the one north of the St. Nicholas convent, about 9 km away from Λεωνίδιο [Leōnίδιο].¹⁹ At least one archaeological excavation conducted within the cave revealed the presence of ceramic fragments datable to the Mycenaean period, along with other pottery specimens belonging to the Geometric, Classical, Hellenistic, Roman, and Early Christian periods.²⁰ This evidence suggests that the cave was utilised continuously, with a probable association of ritual practices. This is consistent with Pausanias' account that the local

¹² Οικονόμου 1952.

¹³ Μπεκύρος 2018.

¹⁴ Cf. Λιόσης 2016.

¹⁵ All translations in the paper are the author's. The translations of the *Description of Greece* are based on the Teubner edition from 1989 (Rocha-Pereira 1989).

¹⁶ Brasiai is the last coastal town of the Free Laconians in this direction.

¹⁷ Talbert 2000: 888, 58 for the map.

¹⁸ Φάκλαρης 1990: 136 and others.

¹⁹ Ιωάννου 1974.

²⁰ Φάκλαρης 1984: 35.

population regarded the cave as the site of Dionysus' upbringing, making it an appropriate location for worship. The plain is most likely to be identified with the lowland area to the east of Λεωνίδιο [Leōnídio] proper. The promontory is commonly identified²¹ with a strip of land extending from the church of Saint Leonidis. Furthermore, it is essential to consider that the sea level during Pausanias' times was approximately 5.5 meters lower.²² The statues themselves were lost to history.

Martin Crusius

In Crusius' *Turcograecia*²³, we are able to find a short mention regarding the Modern Greek language – it is said that 'everyone, wherever they may be, understand each other: with the exception of the Ionians, who inhabit 14 villages (pagos) in the Peloponnese, between Nafplio and Monemvasia'. Regarding the 'Ionians', the author later says that 'they are called Zacones (Hi, Zacones (...) dicuntur)'. As is the case with the majority of subsequent descriptions, the language of the people is deemed noteworthy to warrant mention: they 'use the ancient language, transgressing, however, in many aspects as regards the grammar'. As such, two characteristics are emphasised: the lack of mutual intelligibility between Tsakonian and Modern Greek as well as the archaic character of Tsakonian.

Evliya Çelebi

The eighth volume of Evliya Çelebi's *Seyâhatnâme*²⁴ (*Book of Travel*) from around 1667–1670 (the author visited Tsakonia around 1667–1668, having spent a day there) contains the first and one of the most comprehensive descriptions of both the Tsakonian people and the

²¹ Ρωμαίος 1955: 94-99; Φάκλαρης 1990: 197.

²² Νικόλαος 2014: 264.

²³ Crusius 1584: 489.

²⁴ The translations of the *Seyâhatnâme* are based on the 2011 edition, translated to Modern Turkish (Çelebi 2011) with references to the original Ottoman text (Çelebi 1928 after Arısoy 2018).

region's landscape. Additionally, the author was the first to document Tsakonian vocabulary, although some of his transcriptions are challenging to decipher, particularly given the possibility that they originate from a different dialect (Τζιτζιλής forthcoming). He proceeded to Tsakonia, traversing towards Monemvasia. It appears that 'his' Tsakonia extends considerably farther to the south than Tsakonia proper.²⁵

Evliya Çelebi refers to Tsakonia as either *Çakona* or *Çakonya*. He first says that 'between the mountains of Monemvasia and Nafplio there is a different people [ḵavm], which is called *Çakona*', and later that 'it is a large nahiye in the kadiluk of Monemvasia'. The reach of 17th century Tsakonia, then, was much larger than nowadays. Furthermore, the entire region was rather populated by Tsakonians (who amounted to 10 thousand people – they must have been quite dispersed), since 'they generally come to Monemvasia or Nafplio with their wives and sons, and work as porters', i.e. both cities must have been at least somewhat convenient for parts of the population to travel there. Another significant point that the author refers to is that the *Çakona* means 'a different people'. The word used for 'people' is 'ḵavm' (قوم), which can be interpreted in two ways. The first meaning is 'a party, group, class of people', which does not align with the context. The second option is 'a people, nation'.²⁶ The use of the word with the second meaning would serve to emphasise the distinctiveness of the Tsakonians as a population group – a concept also highlighted by Bernard Randolph.²⁷

Possibly even more interesting is the mention that 'everyone lives like a Christian, reads the Bible, and feigns being Greek'. The last statement has no further explanation from the author's side – it is unknown whether they called themselves Greeks, behaved in a similar manner or just identified with the same religious denomination (although 'their sects, languages, and dialects are different').

Both the characterisation of the local geography as well as the people is somewhat ambivalent. First, the author writes that 'there are steep, rocky, and woody mountains that nobody can reach' and implies that the area is unfriendly, because 'wheat, barley and other cereals, as well

²⁵ Λιόσης 2007: 37.

²⁶ Redhouse 1890, s.v. قوم.

²⁷ See corresponding section.

as fruits and vegetables do not grow in these mountains'. On the other hand, 'its water and air is pleasant and its flowing rivers numerous'. With regard to the local vegetation, the traveller offers no description beyond the cultivation of millet and corn. It may be that the traveller was uninterested in trees and shrubbery, having become accustomed to similar species in Anatolia, or that other features captured his attention. One distinctive feature of the area is the ubiquitous red rock, which the author only mentions in passing. He says that 'we left there and moved towards the ruined Fortress of *Çakonya* with red rock on our left side'.

The area's geography, although making it seemingly unreachable and difficult to cultivate, is extremely beneficial to the local population since – thanks to the water, air, and flowing rivers – 'its inhabitants are cocksure and burly, they look giant, like *Dabbetu'l-arz*,²⁸ they are strong, brave, and courageous infidels'. And yet, the traveller is not averted to calling them 'a band of ill-tempered, malevolent, and lazy infidels'. The second highly hyperbolic description may be explained using the original, Ottoman text, where words of the Persian origin were employed in a highly phonetically harmonious manner: *kâfir-i bed-hûy, bed-kâr, bî-kâr*.²⁹ The strength of the Tsakonians is further emphasised when Çelebi mentions how much weight they can carry: 'sometimes even pregnant women carry 250 oka [~325 kg] on their backs. Some of them carry two children in their arms and besides that carry 250 oka. And their young men carry three hundred or four hundred oka [~384 kg to ~512 kg]', finishing the description with a short but very telling 'the infidels are quite strong'. This is in accordance both with the mention that they work as porters and that they are giant. It needs to be noted, furthermore, that the unreachable mountains are no problem for the locals, since 'their voices bellow in the mountains. They can communicate well even when two mountains are apart by two fersah [~11–14 km]'.

The Ottoman traveller provides a wealth of intriguing insights into the Tsakonians, including their dietary habits, attire, and physical characteristics. He says that 'since there is only millet and corn, everyone

²⁸ The Beast of the Earth associated with the Judgement Day, according to the Qur'an (27:82).

²⁹ Arısoy 2018: 87.

eats corn', and that 'if they eat wholemeal bread in the cities, they get sick. On every occasion their relatives bring loads of cornbread from their houses and they eat it'. The first part is surely hyperbolic, further emphasising the difficult and unfriendly character of the region. While not mentioning it at first, Çelebi later says that 'our horses and us were tired of eating millet and goat meat', meaning the latter must have been a staple in the Tsakonian diet as well.³⁰ The author asserts that the clothing in question is unusual (*tuhaf*), although it is unclear whether this is a reflection of regional norms or a more general observation. The Tsakonians 'wear unusual garments, each being a white aba kebe [a kind of felt jacket] with tufted tassels. They wear unusual garments with thin waists, wide skirts, and fitted sleeves, and everybody, men and women, wraps their head with a white head covering'. Furthermore, Çelebi does not refrain from ridicule in this section either, saying that 'when the women let down their black hair and wear the white head covering, they look ridiculous, weird and oddly shaped, so that whoever sees them, collapses without laughter'. Lastly, their appearance is described in a similarly hyperbolic manner we would expect from the Ottoman traveller: 'Everyone has a face like a Kalmyk Tatar with a cauldron-like head, camel teeth, large ears, large eyes, flat face, and lips like Samson.'

In his description, the author then proceeds to write down thirty-five words in Tsakonian, many of them difficult to decipher, some unknown, yet most of them comparable to a high degree with contemporary Tsakonian.³¹

Evliya Çelebi's Tsakonia is highly ambivalent. While the geography is described as both unapproachable and unwelcoming, it is also depicted as nourishing and pleasant. The people are portrayed as both lazy and ill-tempered, with a caricature-like appearance, and yet they are also brave, strong, and giant. The diet is initially presented as consisting only of corn, but the author eventually reveals that goat meat is so prevalent that he was tired of eating it. The author's penchant for hyperbole is evident in his portrayal of the locals. He asserts they are so strong that they can carry 500 kg, while their voice is so loud that it can

³⁰ Cf. also the section on Chateaubriand where he drank excellent milk.

³¹ Cf. e.g. Κωστάκης 1951: 153.

be heard 14 km away. Conversely, he describes their heads, teeth, ears, eyes, and lips as large, and he depicts women's attire as peculiar and overwhelming. Despite their hyperbolic nature, these descriptions offer insights into both the Tsakonians themselves and the author's perception of these people.

Bernard Randolph

In his *The Present State of the Morea* from 1686 (the author travelled to the Peloponnese around 1671–1679), Randolph first writes that 'the Inhabitants of the Morea are Turks, Greeks, Albaneses and T'Zackonians',³² and then goes on to say that 'the T'Zackonians are most in Towns, they are a very poor People, serving as Porters, both Men and Women carrying very great Burthens'.³³

The most important takeaway is that the Tsakonians were considered a separate entity from the Greeks, which may attest to their distinctiveness as a population.³⁴ The rationale behind Randolph's assertion that the Tsakonians constitute a distinct population remains unclear, as he does not provide a detailed explanation – it seems as if he believes there would be no reason for the two to be mixed. Their distinctive trait of poverty and their occupation as porters align closely with the earlier description by Evliya Çelebi who highlights their physical strength.

Jean-Baptiste Gaspard d'Ansse de Villoison

De Villoison was the first author who mentions Tsakonian words and approaches them in a philological manner as well as without contempt for the 'barbaric' character of the language.³⁵ In all, he refers to Tsakonia twice in his works: in a journal from his trip to Greece³⁶

³² Randolph 1686: 15.

³³ Randolph 1686: 16.

³⁴ Cf. above, on Evliya Çelebi.

³⁵ Famerie 2007: 236, 238–239.

³⁶ Famerie 2006: 52, translated here after Famerie 2007: 237; the voyage took place in the years 1784–1786.

and in a footnote in a preface to his edition of the *Iliad*.³⁷ Whether he actually visited Tsakonia is questionable. The author himself writes: ‘I spoke to numerous Tzaconians in the Peloponnese & chiefly Sparta & Nauplio.’³⁸

De Villoison refers to the region as Τζακονιά (in the journal) and to the people as les Tzaconiens (French) or Tzacones (Latin), who inhabit villages ‘in between Nauplio and Epidaurus, Limeria or Monembasia’. He mentions twice Prastos, Kastanitzia, and Sitina as part of the region, while in the preface he adds that Prastos may correspond to the ancient city of Prasiae (likely based on the phonetic similarity),³⁹ and he calls all three places as *cities (oppida)* instead of *villages*, and enumerates other villages (*uiculos*): Platanos, Karakovouni, Hagia Anna, Hagio-Petro, and Castri. De Villoison writes that of the three cities (*oppida*) ‘the two first indeed consist of around 400 houses, while the third one of a 100’ and furthermore, he calls Prastos ‘the capital of Tzaconia & in which Greek monks gather’ – this account is consistent with the writings of William Martin Leake who travelled to the region in 1806, about 20 years after de Villoison.⁴⁰ One more element attesting to the wealthiness of Prastos is a short mention regarding the presence of ‘some merchants who occasionally make for Constantinople to trade’.

As far as geography is concerned, the only feature that comes to the author’s mind concerns the mountains – he calls the region ‘mountainous’ (*montueux*), places the villages in ‘harsh mountains’ (*praeruptis montibus*), and says that the Tsakonians speak their language ‘in their extremely harsh and nearly inaccessible mountains’ (*asperrimis & fere inaccessis montibus*). The region, albeit described in rather negative terms, is ‘very healthy’ (*très sain*).

This corresponds extremely well to de Villoison’s description of the Tsakonian populace. In his journal, the author says that they ‘live more than a hundred years with no sickness, neither do they die except of old age’ – which he also reiterates in the preface to the *Iliad*, noting

³⁷ de Villoison 1788: LXIX, n. 1.

³⁸ Cf. also Leake 1830: 508: ‘Villoison, it appears, made some inquiries concerning the Tzakonic dialect when he was in Greece; but, as he did not visit this district, his information on the subject was very scanty.’

³⁹ Cf. above.

⁴⁰ Cf. below for more details.

that the Tsakonians ‘live up to a hundred years without sickness nor a doctor’. Besides, he briefly lists other characteristics, i.e. *good, noble, candid, patient during work, devoted to the truth and their guests, robust, wilful*. Perhaps the most interesting part of the description of the people includes the two references to the behaviour of women, who aside from being ‘tall, beautiful, vigorous, and healthy’ are also ‘still “high-showers”’ (φαينوμήριδες⁴¹ [phainomérides]) and ‘the only in nearly all of Greece and the Orient who do not use women’s underwear nor loincloths’ – this does not appear in any other travel account, perhaps due to taboo or omission. Another explanation lies in the fact that de Villoison was a classical philologist, seemingly prepared in all things Spartan. As such, he might have paid more attention to the way women were dressed in order to see if the ancient descriptions (like the one by Ibycus) are still correct.

The author also brings to the forefront the Doric character of both the people and their language, mentioning that the Tsakonians ‘come from ancient Laconians’ (*ab antiquis Laconibus oriundi*). In other parts of the journal and the *Iliad*’s preface, he says that ‘they speak Doric mixed with Italian’,⁴² that among them he ‘rediscovered in part the language of the Ancient Dorians, the dialect of Pindar and Theocritus’ and also that ‘they retained many ancient Doric words and forms new and unheard to other modern Greeks’. The archaic character of their language is further emphasised by the mention that ‘they use many words, whose meaning other Greeks cannot comprehend, from the old language’.

William Martin Leake

The author, briefly mentioned in the section on de Villoison, travelled to the Peloponnese in the beginning of the 19th century, passing through Tsakonia on the 20th–22nd of March of 1806. He recorded his travels in

⁴¹ Lit. ‘showing the thigh’ or ‘with bare thigh’, used by Ibycus (Ibyc. 61) for Spartan women since they wore clothes with side slits, i.e. with the thighs exposed (Pape 1864, s.v. φαينوμήρις).

⁴² Likely referring to the number of Italian loanwords in Tsakonian.

the second volume of *Travels in the Morea: With a Map and Plans*.⁴³ Although he presented himself as a mere tourist, he was, in fact, a British intelligence agent working for the Foreign Office.⁴⁴ Consequently, his geographical descriptions are highly detailed, with the time recorded to the minute. His journey begins in the north, whereby he enters Tsakonia through the marsh of Mostó⁴⁵ (Λίμνη του Μουστού) and the plain of Ai Andhréa (Άγιος Ανδρέας), passing through Prastó (Πραστός), close to Sítena (Σίταινα), visiting Kastánitza (Καστάνιτσα), and leaving in the west, through Véria (Βέρια). He also mentions other Tsakonian settlements, including Lenídhī (Λεωνίδιο), Melanó (Μέλανα) and Deró (Τυρός?). In most of the places the author visits, he searches for antiquities,⁴⁶ attempting to find ancient towns in modern villages.

Leake places the northern border of Tsakonia on the Mostó lake and stream (Λίμνη του Μουστού), and he compares the reach of ancient Laconia and modern Tsakonia by saying that ‘the boundaries of which province [Laconia] seem to have been the same as those of the modern Tzakonia, namely, the lake and river of Mostó’, as well as ‘it may easily be conceived, however, that the name, being a corruption of Laconia, may have formerly had a more extensive chorographical signification, and that its borders may have been contracted as the dialect which distinguished the original people was gradually displaced’. Leake’s Tsakonia seems to be the closest to Tsakonia proper, since ‘Kastánitza, Sítena, and Prastó, *together with the villages on the sea-side dependent on the latter, viz. Lenídhī, Melanó, Deró, and the Kalývia of St. Andrew, form the district of Tzakoniá, vulgarly pronounced Tjakoniá*’. It is difficult to ascertain what exactly the author meant by *tj* in *Tjakoniá*, possibly [*tʃ*]. In any case, the difference in accent is notable, as an analogical one can be found in modern-day Greek and Tsakonian, wherein Tsakonia is Τσακωνιά [Tsakōniá] and Τσακωνία [Tsakōniá], respectively.

Leake makes many references to the region’s geography, especially when researching antiquities and describing their position. Most of the

⁴³ Leake 1830.

⁴⁴ McNeal 1993: 33.

⁴⁵ The names in this section are cited in the way Leake writes them in his work. The current Modern Greek name is written in parentheses.

⁴⁶ Which, since they bear no significance for the way Tsakonia is presented, will not be analysed in this article.

remarks refer to Tsakonia's mountainous character, as such he mentions 'the villages lying on the cultivated slopes of the mountain' or 'so mountainous and circuitous is the road by land'. Σίταινα, for example, 'is immediately under one of the highest and steepest summits of Mount Málevo' [Μαλεβός, a.k.a. Πάρνωνας], while both Πραστός and Καστάνιτσα are located in an elevated ('lofty') place. These mountains are contrasted with the plains of Άγιος Ανδρέας, not only regarding the geographical difference but also in terms of 'air quality'. As such 'the air of these mountains is as pure and healthy in summer, as that of the plain of Astró [Άστρός] and St. Andrew [Άγιος Ανδρέας] is pernicious'. There are some references to the rough character of the roads: some being uneven to the point that the expedition lost baggage, 'one of our horses having fallen in the rugged ascent', other times just being 'a rugged zig-zag path'. When leaving Kastánitza, the author notices that 'our road is very rugged, and has been furrowed by the melting of the snow'. The rivers appear similarly rugged, like the one near Πραστός, which 'flow in a rocky channel below'. Another thing Leake describes a few times are caverns, one at the foot of Λαγοβούνι, 'there is a fine cavern with a small entrance', which he attempts to identify as the one described by Pausanias; the other one near Καστάνιτσα, a hermitage, 'is a great cavern, in front of which a wall has been built'.

The descriptions of the local flora are, sadly, scarce. Most refer to the various plants cultivated in the villages, 'the hills which we pass over are covered with cornfields, and olive-trees cultivated in terraces belonging to Prasto', while 'the soil of Kastánitza produces neither oil, nor wheat, nor barley; nothing but apples, chestnuts, vines, and rye. The last is grown in some of the highest parts of the mountain, where they reap the grain in August, and sow immediately'. As for the natural flora, Leake mostly makes mentions of the various types of forests, such as 'the firwoods of Mount Parnos' [Πάρνωνας], of which the locals 'make no use', as well as he says that 'the ridge immediately above Kastánitza is covered with a forest of chestnut trees, mixed with a few oaks'.

The first place the author visited is Ai Andhréa (Άγιος Ανδρέας), or Stó Ialó ('at the sea'), the second closer to the official Tsakonian name Γιαλέ. Leake makes little mention besides saying that 'these Καλύβια

[huts] form a large village on the foot of the mountain in the southern corner of the plain'. Similarly, the description of Sítēna (Σίταινα) is brief, 'a village of 100 houses', i.e. quite a sizable one, especially compared to its current extent.

A bit more extensive are the mentions of Prastó (Πραστός) – the author notes that 'the hills which we pass over are covered with corn-fields, and olive-trees cultivated in terraces belonging to Prastó' and later, when passing from a different side, he says that 'that town [Prastos] is not in sight, but I perceive the cultivated hills about it'. Both of these descriptions attest to the highly developed agricultural sector in and near the village. Prastó (Πραστός), furthermore, 'has lately engaged in the commerce of Spetzia [Σπέτσες], has become rich, and now owns many ships'. Besides, the village 'stands in a cold and lofty situation', and its people 'migrate in the winter to Lenídhī, where the bishop has a house, or to the two villages of Melanó and Deró, near it, or to this place [Άγιος Ανδρέας]', a fact which is corroborated by the locals who attest to migrations from more 'inland' villages to the coast even after WWII.⁴⁷ It is also interesting that the author mentions 'Kastánitza, Sítēna, and Prastó, *together with the villages on the sea-side dependent on the latter, viz. Lenídhī, Melanó, Deró, and the Kalývia of St. Andrew*' – this dependence was most likely economical and connected with seasonal migrations of people from Πραστός.

Even more information is given on Kastánitza (Καστάνιτσα), 'once a town of some importance'. The location is similar to most other villages, i.e. it is 'seen in a lofty situation just under the woods of Mount Málevo'. The author immediately goes on to describe a rivalry between the two villages: 'Prastó, *which now absorbs all the wealth and population of the neighbourhood, was once so inferior, say the people of Kastánitza, to their own town, as to look like its Kalývia.*' Moreover, he notes that 'the Kastanitziótes are (...) jealous, to a degree of malignity, of the prosperity of their neighbours of Prastó'. The reason for the misfortune of the former being migration since 'many of the houses [in Kastánitza] are empty, the inhabitants having migrated to Ydhra

⁴⁷ I owe this knowledge to a personal communication with Panos Marnēris, a Tsakonian from Παλαιόχωρα, in August of 2024. He himself would seasonally migrate from Παλαιόχωρα to Τυρός in the 1960s.

[Υδρα], Spetzia, or Constantinople'. Later, Leake gives a fuller image of the tragic state *Καστάνιτσα* found itself in: 'the village now possesses only eight *Zevgária* [pairs]; formerly it had between three and four hundred.'

As it seems, both *Πραστός* and *Καστάνιτσα* were cultivating connections with nearby trade centres, with the merchants of *Πραστός* amassing huge amounts of wealth, being able to construct large mansions in *Λεωνίδιο*, such as one *Πύργος Τσικαλιώτη* [*Pýrgos Tsikalíotī*] (The Tower of Tsikaliotis), constructed in 1808 for *Κωνσταντίνος Τσικαλιώτης* [*Kōnstantínos Tsikalíotīs*], a member of a merchant family from *Πραστός*,⁴⁸ as well as some forming trading enterprises, such as the one initiated and led by *Κώνστας Χατζηπαναγιώτης-Πολίτης* [*Kónstas Chatzīpanagiótīs-Polítīs*], which had its seat in *Πραστός* and around 1770–1780 had branches in many places in the Ottoman Empire as well as in *Taganrog*, *English Kythira*, *Trieste*, *Livorno*, and *Marseille* (*Μερικάκης* 1956). The trade is also mentioned by the author, who, after saying that 'the soil of *Kastánitza* produces neither oil, nor wheat, nor barley; nothing but apples, chestnuts, vines, and rye', continues with 'the inhabitants gain their livelihood (...) by keeping shops in *Místra* [*Μυστράς*], *Anáplī* [*Ναύπλιο*], *Tripolitza* [*Τρίπολη*], *Spétzia* [*Σπέτσες*], *Constantinople*; some traffic as far as *Russia*, while others are engaged in *Spetziote* ships, as sailors'.

The only reference to the disposition of the people is made with regard to the inhabitants of *Καστάνιτσα*. The author says that 'the *Kastanitziótes* are a well-made, active, clever race', before mentioning the rivalry with *Πραστός*.⁴⁹

The wealthiness of both villages is also reflected in the housing of *Καστάνιτσα*, as 'their houses are spacious, well built, and well furnished; those of the largest size consist of three stories, of which the lowest is the stable, the middle a kind of magazine for the furniture of show and value, as well as the arms, with which these mountaineers are well provided; the upper story consists of two chambers, the inner having a chimney and hearth, and the outer a divan, as being the room of reception'. One must remember an important point: this is a mountain

⁴⁸ Βαγένας 1980.

⁴⁹ Cf. above.

village, where constructing such houses, not mentioning bringing furniture ‘of show and value’, would be extremely costly.

The author first refers to Tsakonian as ‘the peculiar dialect of modern Greek which is spoken in this part of the country’, while later he calls it *Tzakonic*, and after enumerating Tsakonian villages and convents,⁵⁰ he says that ‘it is only in these villages and convents that the Tzakonic is spoken, a dialect which is believed by the Greeks to preserve many ancient Doric forms of speech’. Later he casts serious doubt on the surmised Doric character of the dialect, asking ‘whether the pretended Dorisms are not in many instances an effect of the imagination of the *διδάσκαλοι* [teachers], or other half-educated persons, in their anxiety to discover some remains of the Doric in a district where they know it to have been anciently spoken, and where the peasantry still preserve a peculiar patois’. Similarly, when presented with a supposedly Tsakonian couplet, he says it was ‘nothing more than an attempt to write two bad lines in Doric’, and that after this event ‘that some of the reputed Dorisms of the Tzakonic are the invention of schoolmasters, I was convinced’. Nevertheless, Leake does admit that ‘it is certain, however, that there are some Doric words in actual use’, as well as ‘the dialect of Tzakonia appears to be more remarkable for having preserved words of common Hellenic in greater number than are to be found in any of the other unfrequented parts of Greece’, after which he lists a few examples both of the Dorisms and Hellenisms. Thus, the author is the first to doubt the Doric character of the language, something that was considered its foremost characteristic as well as the core of Tsakonian identity today.

De Villoison, analysed above, is also adduced and criticised here: ‘Villoison, it appears, made some inquiries concerning the Tsakonic dialect when he was in Greece; but, as he did not visit this district, his information on the subject was very scanty. Some of the examples which he adduces are found in every part of Greece, as *ὄχθρὸς* for *ἐχθρὸς*, &c.’ It is somewhat perplexing why Leake did not comment on de Villoison’s staunch support of the Doric character of Tsakonian.

Furthermore, Leake arrives at the conclusion that ‘in short, as the real Tzakonic is seldom or never written, as the common Romaic is

⁵⁰ Cf. above.

used in all transactions which require writing, as it is generally understood by the people, and spoken by all lettered and travelled persons, it can hardly be doubted that the peculiarities of speech of this small district will soon be forgotten'. As one can see, however, Tzakonic has withstood the test of time and is still spoken in the same region and villages, more than 200 years later.

François-René de Chateaubriand

Finally, we will examine the author whose journey in the Peloponnese has not been adequately traced, likely due to the limited information he has provided. Chateaubriand went from Μυστράς to ancient Λέρνα (near modern-day Μύλοι Αργολίδας) and Άργος on the 19–20th of August 1806. He describes the journey in his *Itinéraire de Paris a Jérusalem et de Jérusalem a Paris*.⁵¹

The road he took is highly difficult to examine – while there is mention of one village (Saint-Paul, i.e. some Άγιος Παύλος [Άγιος Παύλος]?), we currently have no idea what it can be identified with.⁵² We know that he left the region of Μυστράς-Σπάρτη [Mystrás-Spárti] and first ‘we followed for some time the road to Tripolizza [Τρίπολη [Trípoli]]; later, turning eastwards, we plunged ourselves into the mountain gorges’. This means he must have been at least very close to Tsakonia proper, but since this turn east might have been undertaken at any step of the way between the two cities, we can say nothing with certainty. However, Chateaubriand also says that ‘at four in the morning we reached the summit of the mountain’. It is worth noting what speed was the group traveling at – the author writes that ‘I hit my head so hard on a branch of one of these trees that I was thrown ten paces back unconscious and especially as my horse continued to gallop’. While this may be attributed to hyperbole typical of travelogues, the travellers were still moving at a considerable pace. It is reasonable to conclude that, given the one-hour time frame from Μυστράς to ‘the summit of the mountain’, they traversed a significant distance.

⁵¹ First edition: de Chateaubriand 1811.

⁵² Οικονόμου 1952.

After a sizable time jump – eight hours – the author arrives at ‘a large village called Saint Paul, quite close to the sea’. Currently, there is no such village in the region (or at least one known under the name mentioned). Then, after leaving, ‘we followed the road to [of?] Ancient Kynouria (le chemin de l’ancienne Cynurie)’ – either the author did not yet enter the borders of the province (or he thought he did not) or they were already there and took an antique road. In any case, soon after ‘we entered the mountain range of Parthénios (Παρθένιον ὄρος [Parthénion óros]) and we descended alongside a river, whose course led us to the sea’. If we assume the river they followed exists to this day with at least a similar course, there are two likely places of descent – modern-day Ἄστρος [Ástros] (with the Τάνος [Tános] river) and Κιβέρι [Kivéri].

Since the author says ‘from the point where we had arrived, there was still a three-hour journey to Argos’, it might be assumed that Κιβέρι is too close and that even with the Lerna marsh in the way they would have been able to cross it much faster. It seems this is just assumed time based on Chateaubriand’s mental calculations, as by some point ‘it was impossible to reach Argos’ and since ‘we spent the rest of the night with them [reapers near the village of Lerna]’. On the other hand, given how much trouble the group had with the marshes, having lost their way, falling into a ditch, etc., perhaps the author took the difficult character into consideration, overcompensating slightly with the time needed to reach Argos? Or perhaps there was no overcompensation and three hours was the standard time for that? The most important clue to get closer to the correct answer is the author’s own explanation: ‘[...] there was need to pass the bottom of the gulf traversing through the marsh of Lerna, which reached between the city and the place we found ourselves in.’ There are mountains between Ἄργος and Κιβέρι, but none between Κιβέρι and ancient Λέρνα [Lérna] (modern-day Μύλοι [Mýloi]) – it seems likely, then, that Chateaubriand followed the stream beginning near modern-day Ανδρίτσα [Andrítsa] to arrive on the coast.

Concluding the journey examination, it needs to be said that there is little possibility for a satisfying answer to be extracted from the text – in particular, the lack of toponymic data hinders the ability to gain a comprehensive understanding of the journey. Whether the author passed through any place we would include in Tsakonia proper,

including whether the village of Saint-Paul is one of these places with a different name, remains and will likely remain unsolved. Notwithstanding this pessimistic conclusion, a short analysis of his description of the region (i.e. between the time they turned east from the road towards Τρίπολη and when they started following the river to Κιβέρι) is still valuable.

The first characteristic is, naturally, ‘mountain gorges’ and ‘ravines’, seen immediately after turning eastwards from the main road. Other thing the author notices are wild pine trees (*pinus sylvestris*), similarly to how Leake mentioned fir forests. Besides this, Chateaubriand does not pay much attention to the geographical features. Something he does, however, care about are the people or, rather, their housing and garments, ‘I drank excellent milk in a very clean house, quite resembling of a Swiss hut’, and then, ‘they wear a tunic, which reaches to their knees, and which they tie with a belt: their wide pants are hidden by the bottom part of the tunic; on their nude legs they cross bands which hold their sandals. With their hair cut short, they are absolutely Ancient Greeks without the coat’. This may be compared to the description by Evliya Çelebi who mentions that their garments had ‘thin waists, wide skirts’, which if the waist was bound with a belt, the bottom part of the tunic would resemble a skirt. However, since Chateaubriand does not refer to any other clothing elements Çelebi refers to, like the head covering or the *aba kebe*, and on the other hand Çelebi does not mention wide pants or sandals, nothing more can be said regarding the comparison of these two descriptions – even whether the authors describe the same garment type.

Chateaubriand also encounters one particular person who occupies him quite a bit more, when ‘a young Moraïte came to sit down before me: he resembled Meleager in size and clothing’. Not much more is known about this man, except that he would ‘examine my movements with great curiosity’ and that he would repeat what the author did: ‘I stood up, he stood up; I sat down, he sat down again.’ When offered a cigar ‘he was delighted and gave me a sign to smoke with him’; and he did not want money. Chateaubriand finally describes him as ‘a Greek become Barbarian (un Grec devenu Barbare)’ as well as he notes in a footnote that ‘the Greeks of these mountains consider

themselves the true descendants of the Lacedaemonians; they say that the Maniots are nothing more than a band of foreign brigands and they are right'. This final mention corresponds very well to the Doric character of the Tsakonians, emphasised by nearly every author analysed in this paper.⁵³

Conclusions

Every author who describes the extent of Tsakonia does so in a slightly different manner. Whether limiting themselves to mentioning between which larger settlements is the region found or going as far as enumerating the villages included, all of the authors place Tsakonia between Ναύπλιο and Μονεμβασία. This is a sufficiently large area not to be wrong, but it is also not precise enough for us to analyse its historical reach. Leake's Tsakonia seems to be the closest one to Tsakonia proper, as described in the introductory section of this paper.

The descriptions of Tsakonia are inherently ambivalent in most of the analysed works – the region, extremely mountainous and unapproachable nearly to the point of being hostile, is at the same time highly beneficial to the local population – the air, rivers, waters are all described as pleasant and healthy (notwithstanding Leake's 'criticism' of the air in Άγιοϛ Ανδρέας). While only a very limited entourage of crops can be cultivated in the Tsakonian mountains, the locals do not suffer lack of nourishment, which would never allow them to become as strong as they are described to be. Tsakonia also seems to be even more 'exotic' than Greece in general – the people more barbaric, the landscape more alien – not only, as one would expect, for the Western travellers⁵⁴ but also for Çelebi, who, e.g., is very surprised by the local garments.

The landscape is very varied, speckled with gorges, ravines, cliffs, caverns, and, which is especially emphasised, with rugged, unfriendly roads. This last point is a possible reason why none of the analysed authors ever made it to either the coastal region of Tsakonia proper

⁵³ Which, nevertheless, is no proof that these must be Tsakonians.

⁵⁴ Kotzageorgi 1992.

(Τυρός, Πλάκα, Μέλανα, etc.) nor to more inland parts (such as Λεωνίδιο) – since a Λεωνίδιο-Αθήνα road was only constructed in the second half of the 20th century, access to the aforementioned villages was much more difficult than it is today, some being only reachable via ship. Also interesting is the lack of mentions of the ubiquitous red rock (excluding Çelebi who does recall seeing some), to be found nearly everywhere in Tsakonia. Perhaps its existence did not seem a surprise for the remaining authors?

We see very few surprises regarding the local flora – coniferous forests are typical not only for Tsakonia itself but also for most of the Peloponnese. Crop cultivation has been extensively described, mostly in negative terms, i.e. that not much grows in the Tsakonian mountains, except for a few notable plants: corn, millet, chestnuts, all depending on which village nearby. However, animal husbandry has never been mentioned, except for minuscule hints, such as Çelebi getting tired of eating goat meat or Chateaubriand drinking excellent milk.

The local populace is commonly described as strong and burly, sometimes clever and industrious, especially when it comes to trade – a fact observable very clearly in other historical sources. This strength enabled the Tsakonians to work as porters in surrounding towns, something that was mentioned more than once. Only Çelebi (both negatively and positively) and de Villosion (positively) describe their character in detail, with Leake writing about people from a specific village (e.g. about Tsakonians from Καστάνιτσα, jealous of their neighbours from Πραστός).

The most important thing to note regarding the locals is their separateness, emphasised not only in longer descriptions but also in short notes. They are always distinguished from any other populaces, whether Turks, Albanians, or even Greeks, with Çelebi going as far as to say that they ‘feign being Greek’. What is the reason for considering the Tsakonians different from the others is not clear – as if it seemed obvious to each author that they would not be confused for being Greek.

A strong emphasis is placed on the language as well. Most authors reference its Doric character, Leake being an outlier. He questions the ‘Doricness’, considering it as made up by the local teachers, obsessed with looking for an Ancient dialect in the region where it was spoken

many years ago. In addition to the aforementioned ‘Doricness’, the archaic elements are especially emphasised – from comparing words or grammatical features with Ancient Greek (e.g., Villoison) to concluding that it basically is the ancient language ‘transgressing, however, in many aspects as regards the grammar’ (Crusius). Others stop at only enumerating the words (Çelebi) with no further comments on their character. Furthermore, the distinctiveness of the language is brought to the forefront – Tsakonian is not mutually intelligible with Modern Greek, and one requires an interpreter to communicate in the region.

One other thing that needs to be mentioned by this point is that Tsakonia was never the destination of the travels, as one might expect with Athens, Jerusalem, Constantinople, etc., but a stop, a region one passes through to get to a final destination; it was an unfriendly, isolated *terra incognita* where brigands roam (or where not even brigands roam – only Chateaubriand mentions anything like this) and the only worthwhile elements are those found in Pausanias (and antiquity as a whole – cf. the obsession with the Ancient Doric-Tsakonian language) and remaining in the region to this day or those important from an imperial point of view, catalogued in a sort of *cartographical study*, whether that be the British in the case of Leake or of the Ottoman Empire with Çelebi.⁵⁵

However, even though Tsakonia might be considered the pariah of travels to Greece in general, whether western or eastern, in no case does it seem that it has been viewed wholly negatively or positively. The authors are able to appreciate the character of the locals and the health benefits of the regional features, at the same time consciously perceiving the difficult terrain or scarcity of crops (and some Tsakonian vices – laziness, jealousy, etc.). Whether new travellers, having visited Tsakonia in the age of rising tourism, will be able to see the same features – rocky mountains, strong people, and peculiar language – and admire them or approach them critically as the pre-20th century authors did, time will tell.

⁵⁵ Cf. Haliloğlu 2017 for a more in-depth analysis of the intentions of his travelogue; I borrow the term *cartographical study* from the same article.

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