



The modern cultural heritage of the ancient city of Eleusis

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Abstract

This paper presents an outline of the cultural heritage of the city of Eleusis in modern times. Eleusis is located in an area continuously inhabited since the Neolithic times, 19 km west of Athens, the capital city of Greece. It had been one of the most important sacred cities of antiquity for more than a thousand years, famous to the Greco-Roman world for the Eleusinian Mysteries and their connection with the religious myth of goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone. In modern times, by the end of the 19th century, the city has gradually become one of the largest industrial centers of Greece, while accomplishing to maintain its cultural wealth.

Keywords: Eleusis, cultural heritage, European Capital of Culture

Introduction

This study focuses on the modern cultural heritage of Eleusis. According to the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage ^[1], cultural heritage includes the elements that make up the “immovable cultural heritage”. These are monuments, such as important architectural works, works of sculpture and painting, works or constructions of universal value from the point of view of the history of art or science. They are also ensembles of buildings, such as groups of buildings in individual settlements, which, due to their architecture, their homogeneity or their location, have universal value from the point of view of history, art or science, as well as landscapes, that is, works of man or a combination of works of man and nature, which have universal value from a historical, aesthetic, ethnological and anthropological point of view. At the same time, there is the intangible cultural heritage, which is the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and techniques - as well as the tools, objects, handicrafts and the cultural spaces associated with them - and which communities, groups and, wherever appropriate, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage, in accordance with the convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, adopted on 17.10.2003 in Paris.

The relationship between tangible and intangible cultural heritage is intertwined due to the inextricable functional relationship between places and communities. Place is shaped and characterized by the groups that compose it. Space is not considered sterile, stable, non-dialectical, immobile, but is socially and culturally produced. People construct space as “their space”, but are also constructed by it ^[2]. “It is transformed into a place through traditions, memories, myths and narratives and its uniqueness is confirmed and legitimized in terms of its relationship with specific representations of the past” ^[3]. According to Läßle ^[4]: “The specificity of each place is reproduced through the articulation of specific local conditions with national and global trends and ultimately through human local practices (which are also articulated through class and other relations)

... Space is not something directly given and perceived, but the result of human ‘synthesis’, a kind of summary of individual places, through which the locally distinct enters a synchronic context – into a spatial system of relations.” Ultimately, each place, by attributing its cultural characteristics, ends up defining the identity of the city.

Since the ancient times, Eleusis was famous in the Greco-Roman world for the Eleusinian Mysteries ^[5] at the Sanctuary of Demeter ^[6], which was destroyed in 396 CE, by the Visigoths of Alaric I, and its old glory vanished from history. During the Byzantine and Ottoman eras, Eleusis is referred to as a small village, in an area deserted by raids and wars, having many ancient ruins but few inhabitants (about 250 in 1829, after the Hellenic War of Independence) ^[7].

Nowadays, the city’s cultural heritage, besides the archaeological site of the Sanctuary, includes byzantine and modern churches, old industrial premises, neoclassical public and private buildings, the first movie theater, the Aeschylia Festival, held annually in honor of the great tragic poet Aeschylus, and others. These attractions will be described in the following subsections ^[8]. ^[14]

The Industrial Cultural Heritage

By the late 19th century, the area of Eleusis (or “Elefsina”) became the first industrial zone of Modern Greece and still one of its main industrial centers, thanks to its strategic location. Gradually, many factories were established and settled there for a variety of activities, i.e., a major concrete factory, distilleries, flour mills, crude oil refineries, a soap factory, the Eleusis Shipyards, ammunition and paper industries, as well as logistics companies ^[15]. Among the advantages of the city, besides being next to the two national motorways and the railway that connect the capital city of Athens to Peloponnese, is a harbor well protected from bad weather, as well as a most important military airfield. All these industrial and commercial activities contributed to the increase of the municipality’s population, amount to 30,147 people, according to the census of 2021 ^[16].

The Church & Celebrations of Panaghia Mesosporitissa

On the hill of the Sanctuary, where remains from prehistoric to Christian times coexist, and to the east of the church of Faustina, rises the post-Byzantine church of Virgin Mary (i.e., Panaghia: “Pan-Holy”), built on the ruins of an older one, probably one of the three early Christian basilicas of Eleusis (Fig. 1). Today, only the architectural remains of the eastern side are visible from the older building. The church is dedicated to the Presentation of Panaghia and is known as “Panaghia Mesosporitissa” (“mid-sowing”), as it is celebrated on November 21st, the time of year when sowing is in the middle. On this day, the faithful flock to the church of Panaghia holding polysporia (“multiseeds”, i.e., boiled cereals and legumes), which Panaghia will bless for good agricultural production. In this way, the memory of the ancient goddess Demeter, protector of agricultural production and the ancient city of Eleusis, is reflected in the face of Panaghia in a remarkable resemblance.



Fig 1: The church of Panaghia Mesosporitissa, on the upper right, at the archaeological site of Eleusis (Source: Collection of G. Pavlopoulos).

Panaghia Mesosporitissa or Aposporitissa is considered the protector of the harvest and “post-harvest”. Every year on November 21, after vespers, an artoklasia (“bread slicing”) is held. The priest blesses the loaves, which are then cut into pieces and distributed to the congregation. The semi-sweet blessed loaves are placed in large baskets with white, embroidered, well-ironed tablecloths. Lighted candles are placed on the loaves: “one candle to Panaghia and the other to Saint Demeter”. Then the polyspori is distributed, made from boiled cereals and legumes, such as barley, wheat, corn, beans, lentils, chickpeas boiled separately so that they retain some hardness, broad beans with pomegranate seeds. These ingredients are boiled for a few minutes all together with sugar. After the mixture has cooled sufficiently, boiled corn, raisins, molasses, cinnamon, and pomegranate seeds are added. The addition of orange zest flavors the polyspori mixture. Thus, they have been blessed by Panaghia and ensure good agricultural production. After all, in ancient times, on the third day of the Anthesteria celebrations, they offered the khytrous, that is, a panspermia (“all-seeds”) to Demeter, to the Demons, but also to the soul-stirring Dionysus, or to the souls of the deads, and during the harvest season, between October and November, they distributed broad beans. Modern residents give Panaghia the role of ancient Demeter and thus ensure that their agricultural production will not be vulnerable to weather conditions, but that divine blessing will protect it:

“thanksgiving panspermia for the good that has passed and the good that must continue”.

The post-Byzantine church belongs to the type of single-aisled vaulted basilica and is built with adobe. The interior is decorated with frescoes dating back to the 18th century. The built iconostasis bears later frescoes and a wooden epistyle. A later bell tower rises to the west of the church (Fig. 2). It is an independent tower-like building, which is based on a solid ancient base and is structured in three levels. Of these, the two upper ones date back to the first half of the 19th century, are roofed with cross-vaults and for their construction, blocks and marbles have been used in second use from the pre-existing buildings of the archaeological site. On the crowning of the roof there is a Byzantine-style marble cross. The bell tower is not mentioned in any written source, but we find depictions of it in engravings and photographs from the 1860s. The first known written reference to the temple is made by Xavier Scrofani in a letter in 1794, while the bell tower first appears in photographs by D. Constantin in the 1860s.



Fig 2: The bell tower (Source: Collection of G. Pavlopoulos).

At the top of the hill there is a modern Clock that began operating for the first time in May 1925. After a pause of several years for technical reasons, the Clock resumed operation and continues to this day.

The Church of Saint Zacharias

The Church of Saint Zacharias dates back to the post-Byzantine period (Fig. 3). It is located in the Heroes’ Square of Eleusis, very close to the archaeological site ^[17]. Saint Zacharias, father of Saint John the Baptist, is celebrated on September 5th. Marble architectural elements and ancient inscriptions have been incorporated into the walls of the church.



Fig 3: The Church of Saint Zacharias in 2010 (Source: Collection of G. Pavlopoulos).

The Church of Saint Zacharias is built on the foundations of a three-aisled early Christian basilica (5th - 6th century CE), remains of which are visible around the church. Ancient material was widely used in the construction of the basilica. The basilica was divided into its aisles by colonnades. The columns and their bases, made of Pentelic marble, had been transferred from the nearby Sanctuary of Demeter. In front of the main church there were two transverse narthexes with an entrance to the south, that is, to the Sacred Road, passing in front of the church, from which access to the basilica was possible. To the North-West of the church, attached to the narthexes, was a square space, the baptistery. In its center there was a built-in swimming pool, lined with thin marble slabs. The swimming pool, today covered by earthworks, had the shape of a free isosceles cross with a cylindrical depression in its middle. During the excavation, a marble lintel was found with the inscription “For the wish of Artemisios and all of his house”, which was considered to refer to the founder of the baptistery. Next to the baptistery, two smaller auxiliary spaces were perhaps the changing room and the light room. In one of them, a marble throne with lion’s feet is preserved, which was placed there, in a second use, coming from an ancient building. Immediately after the liberation from the Ottoman domination, the temple served as the first storage space for antiquities.

The Chapel of Aghios Nikolaos

The chapel of Aghios Nikolaos (Saint Nicolas) was built west of the acropolis hill, on the saddle between the hill of the archaeological site and the hill where the Hellenistic and later Venetian tower was located (Fig. 4). The mills of Tsana (Arvanitian rendering of the name Alexandra) were located next to that chapel, in a bare and deserted place. The Eleusinians visited this place with their loaded animals, to grind their cereals, light the lamps of Aghios Nikolaos and tell the news of the village to Mrs. Tsana. The entrance is on the west side, above which rises a single-domed bell tower. On the north and south walls there are two windows, large in relation to the dimensions of the church, which allow plenty of light to enter its interior, while two smaller windows are located in the sanctuary. The church has no frescoes, but only portable icons. The oldest seems to be the one to the left of the entrance to the sanctuary and depicts Saint Nicolas. There is, however, also an icon of the Saint, dated to 1940, while the portable icon of the Holy Trinity,

crafted in 1925 at the expense of the craftsmen and workers of the “Titan” cement factory of Eleusis, is particularly impressive.

At the beginning of the 20th century, in 1902, the first cement production plant in the Balkans and the Near East was established in the area under the name “Titan”. When the quarries began operating and production increased, it was decided by the Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, at the company’s expense, to demolish the chapel and erect it further east, in the location it is located today, while the Frankish tower was also demolished and the hill was altered by the blasts of the quarries. The transfer, however, was associated with legends. It is precisely the same perception that made the workers not want to move the supernatural statue, which they called Saint Demeter and which is today exhibited as the Kistophorus, in the ground floor hall of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. They believed that “anyone who tried to move it from where it was erected would have their hand cut off”. Also, the demolition of the old church of Aghios Georgios (Saint George), for the excavations of the archaeologist Dimitrios Filios, which lasted from 1882 to 1895, was treated by the workers with religious superstition, a fact that forced the archaeologist’s wife to take a heavy pickaxe in her hands and remove the first stone from the thick walls of the church, so that the workers could begin work.



Fig 4: The chapel of Aghios Nikolaos (Source: Collection of G. Pavlopoulos).

Thus, it is said that the demolition of Aghios Nikolaos also had bad consequences for the perpetrator of the act. The contractor, named Vranas, who was working with “Titan”, because he saw that his workers did not want to demolish the church, set the fire himself and after some time, while he was driving on the road, a car passed by and cut off his hand that was outside the window of his own car. Others say that the worker who set the fire at that moment lost his hand, because a wire rope broke and cut it off. What is certain is that the demolition of the church affected the conscience of the residents, who believed, even if an accident really occurred, that this was the result of an unholy act. There is another story, related to the labor rights of workers on the feast day of Saint Nicolas. On that day, without being an official holiday, the factory for a long-time paid overtime to its employees. It is said, therefore, that this company policy began with a blackout that occurred at the factory, when a worker, responding to another’s complaint about working on Saint Nicolas Day, said: “so what happened if it is Saint Nicolas Day?”. In any case, for the majority of today’s residents, the day of this feast is very important and is a

concern, especially for the older women who live on the slopes of the hill, the preparation of the bread that will be blessed by the priest and distributed to the faithful present, among whom one will also meet old employees of “Titan”.

The Railway Station

When Charilaos Trikoupis became Prime Minister of Greece in March 1882, there was only one railway line, connecting Athens with the port of Piraeus, which had been inaugurated in 1869. In the spring of 1882, a contract was signed between the General Credit Bank and the state for the construction of the Peloponnese Railway that would connect Piraeus with Patras, and work began immediately after. In the autumn of 1882, he founded the company “Piraeus Athens Peloponnese Railways”. The Acropolis Newspaper of March 4th, 1884, refers to the complaints expressed by the Eleusinians because compensation was not paid for their lands. On April 4th, 1884, the train arrived for the first time at the then newly built Eleusis Railway Station (Fig. 5). The railway lines ran parallel to the Sacred Road, a short distance from the Archaeological Site of Eleusis. Around the station were hotels and food shops, and it was essentially the center of the city.



Fig 5: The Eleusis Railway Station (Source: Collection of X. Foulidi)

The railway station buildings in Greece are classified into four categories, depending on the population and the load they served. The Eleusis Railway Station presents similarities with all the B-Class stations, built in the late 19th century. B-Class stations have been built in smaller urban centers or hubs. The A-Class stations (large stations) are characterized by a tripartite structure, with the middle section (two-story) elevated in relation to the wings on either side. The typology of the floor plan is strictly symmetrical, with the middle section serving as a reception area, while the side wings house waiting rooms and office spaces for employees. The stationmaster’s residence is usually located on the second floor of the middle section. From the A-Class to B-Class, the typological differentiation lies only in the size of the proportions of the building volume, which acquires smaller dimensions, maintaining the tripartite arrangement of the A-Class stations. In the floor plan of the Eleusis Station building, although three sections were designed on the ground floor, its western section was never constructed. The central two-story building had a passenger hall, a ticket office, a goods warehouse and a café. The first floor of the building was always intended for the stationmaster and his family to live in. Unfortunately,

the railway line that passed through Eleusis fell into disuse in 2001, when the suburban railway began operating. In 1985 though, the two-story building was designated a listed building by the state. During the city’s candidacy for European Capital of Culture (2023), it was used as an office space and for the implementation of cultural activities until today. The property was now ceded to the Municipality of Eleusis by the owner (the railway company).

The First Cinemas

From the mid-1920s, Eleusis began to change rapidly. The settlement of refugees (1922), the return of conscripts after a decade of war, and the development of industry transformed the semi-rural town into a dynamic urban centre, teeming with life. Along with factory jobs, new opportunities for entertainment and recreation emerged. Cafes and pastry shops gradually adopted the opening hours of shops in Athens (5am to midnight). The more athletic Eleusinians could use the tennis court that had been operating since 1924 on a communal plot of land or choose between two sports clubs, if they preferred more team sports. There was shadow play and puppetry for the children, the Eleusinian Philharmonic for the music lovers, and the occasional theatrical performance by improvised troupes for the theater lovers. But nothing could compare to the magic of cinema.

Cinema appeared in Greece on November 29th, 1896, just eleven months after the first commercial screening organized by the French Lumiere brothers. At nine in the morning, in a specially designed space in a private residence at the center of Athens, screenings of the “cinema photo” were inaugurated, with all the great successes of the Lumiere brothers. The performances of the “moving photographs” began every half hour and the ticket was expensive, but the audience’s response was enthusiastic. The years that followed were difficult and were marked by wars, political or economic instability, dictatorships, national disasters and successive military coups. The state’s attitude towards cinema was rather erratic. The rulers feared that the films being shown might reveal their own wrongdoings, provoke reactions, or even “contaminate” the minds of Greek viewers with foreign ideas! The situation became so unbearable that in 1934 films stopped being made on Greek soil, while cinema owners faced heavy taxation and committees that attempted to regulate everything: from safety standards to the age of viewers.

“Pallas” was the first cinema to operate in Eleusis. It was in this climate that the Tatakis brothers from Asia Minor decided to enter the cinema business; Michalis built the open-air cinema facilities, while Nikos took over the operation. The cinema began operating in the summer of 1938, with Italian machinery from the famous company Cinemeccanica, on a plot of land with bougainvillea and jasmine. The establishment of a cinema was a great adventure for Nikos Tatakis. The projection machine had cost more than a house, while he himself does not seem to have had any specialized experience in the field, given that until then he had been employed as an industrial worker, hairdresser and haberdashery. Nevertheless, “Pallas” quickly became a point of reference in the city. In fact, when the film “Refugee Girl”, by the Egyptian director Togo Mizrahi, was screened, with famous Greek protagonists, the 300 seats in the cinema proved insufficient and the spectators sat on the floor or climbed the branches of the surrounding trees.

A month after the “Pallas”, a second open-air cinema in Eleusis began operating. It was called “Rex”. It had a capacity of 650 seats, but when popular films were shown, many viewers carried stools from their homes. The first film to be shown was “Port Arthur” by the director Nicolas Farkas. The screening conditions were difficult: the projection machines often cut the prints, while the technicians were forced to put them in wells to soften and play on the machine.

The success of the cinema prompted the businessman Nikos Asteriou to create a winter cinema. For this purpose, he used an old ceramic factory on the other side of the city. The inauguration took place on October 28th, 1939. The cinema had a capacity of about 250 seats, which could be removed to convert the building into a ballroom.

The general climate at that time, of course, remained difficult, not only for the cinema owners but also for the viewers themselves. The Metaxas dictatorship (1936-1940) had its own views on the influence of the Seventh Art on the public and persistently tried to control what was said or heard in the theaters. A committee of military and police officers classified films as suitable, unsuitable or strictly unsuitable. Some academics argued that cinema damaged the optic nerves, caused respiratory problems and facilitated the transmission of diseases. The dictator Ioannis Metaxas reacted by imposing prison sentences on any adult, accompanying children under 15 years of age to the cinema. However, he had no objection to financing the production of films, inspired by his own speeches or by the sports activities of the state youth organization. Over 450 short films were shot and screened after the foreign Hollywood productions, so that viewers would leave the cinema with the right images and impressions! The public, of course, did not seem to be deterred by such unconventional views and embraced cinema with passion. Little Eleusis thus acquired a third summer cinema in the summer of 1939. The famous “Orpheus” was a modest ground-floor space, surrounded by tall trees (ideal seats for the neighborhood children, during screenings) on Heroes Square. The Pappas brothers (Dimitris and Spyros) had many dreams for their business, but the outbreak of World War II (for Greece in 1940) overturned all the plans of businessmen and spectators. The cinemas of Eleusis were entering an unpredictable and adventurous period in their lives.

The Aeschylia Festival

The Aeschylia Festival is the most significant cultural event in the modern history of Eleusis, taking place annually and lasting usually between the end of August to early September [18]. It was named after the ancient Greek tragedian Aeschylus (Fig. 6), born in Eleusis c. 525/524 BCE and often considered as the father of tragedy [19].

The festival was established in 1975, after the end of the seven-year dictatorship in Greece (1967-1974), making it the longest-lived arts event in the whole Attica Region, organized by the Municipality of Eleusis. It is an institution where the past is honored and the future is envisioned, marking the beginning of a new era for Eleusis that celebrates the city’s history, its resilience, and its potential for growth and innovation. The main program includes a plethora of diverse cultural events, such as music concerts, theatric plays, visual art exhibitions and installations, dances, cinema projections and others, like the recently connected with the festival Semi-marathon “On the Traces

of Iera Odos” of 21 km (Athens-Eleusis). The vast majority of the events take place at an abandoned soap factory that had been built in 1875, while the first concert takes place at the archeological site of Eleusis, emphasizing the relation of the town with the modern industrial history of Greece.

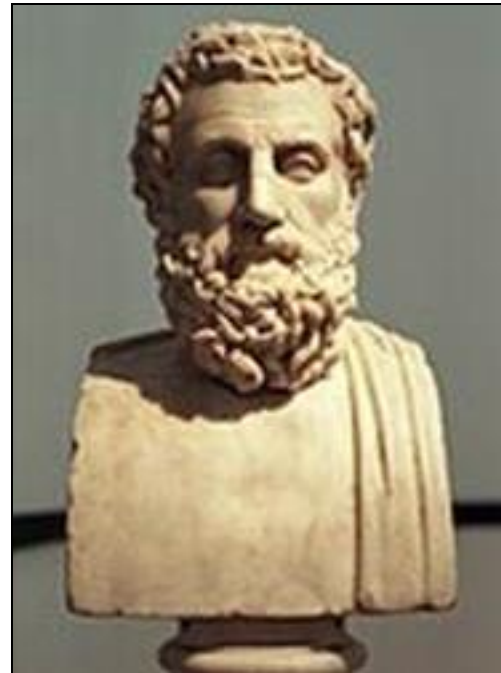


Fig 6: Herma of Aeschylus [20].

Conclusion

By the end of the 19th century and favored by its strategic location, the city of Eleusis has gradually become one of the largest industrial centers of Greece, while accomplishing to maintain its cultural wealth. The relevant premises today constitute elements of industrial cultural heritage. The material heritage, which is perceived by the individual and understandable to society, interacts with the intangible one, which is more vulnerable and more complex [21].

Due to the remarkable historical features of Eleusis, the city was declared the European Capital of Culture in 2023 [22], showcasing its rich cultural heritage and organizing a multitude of events and activities. Consequently, Eleusis offered a rich and innovative cultural program, called “Mysteries of Transition”, which included 465 events and activities in 30 different venues, hosting over 300 artists from Europe, Asia and America. The thematic axes of the program included Man, Society, Environment and Work, aiming at creating a sustainable legacy [23].

After the completion of the year of Capital of Culture, the organization “Elefsina – Arts and Culture” was founded to continue the cultural development of the city and create opportunities for artistic events and activities (elefsina-artsandculture.gr). Thus, Eleusis, a place “fluid, changing and dynamic in the context of social interaction and memory” [24], with such a rich history and modern cultural initiatives, aspires to remain an important center of culture and art in Greece.

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