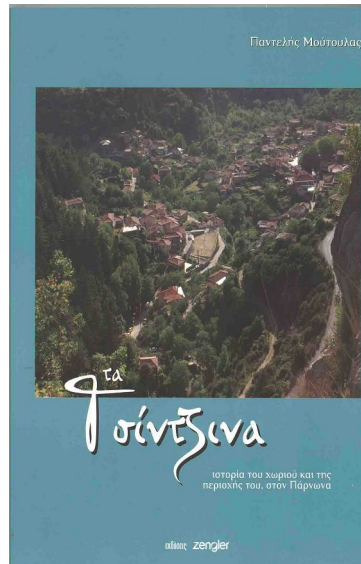


## New Book Review:

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**Moutoulas Pantelis: “Tsintzina: A History of Village and Area”, Vol. I**



Since about 1905, scores of articles –including an unpublished 1941 Monograph– have been written by Greek and foreign academics, intellectuals, locals and friends of no particular expertise but enough knowledge on aspects of Tsintzina history. Now the first book on the subject is a fact.

Author Pantelis Moutoulas, is a professional historian. He is an expert writer on aspects of history of the Peloponnese, the broader peninsula where Tsintzina are located. His first of two volumes on the history of Tsintzina and its broader geographical area, covers the period to year 1715. That year marks the end of the Venetian occupation interval and the beginning of the last years of the Ottoman occupation, before the Greek Independence War of 1821-29.

Born in Athens to a Tsintzinian mother, Moutoulas has enough affinity to the area. His professional approach however becomes evident, right from the opening words of his prologue:

“(…) several people with a high degree of affection to their native locality (...) had the urge to put things on record. In most of such writings, a rather pedantic stereotype is detectable: The village is artificially beautified (...) links to the broader area are downgraded but at the same time, links to a glorious ancient Greek past are sought. Such links, if not quite discovered, are often fabricated via a usually futile pursuit of the origin of the village name (...) An uncritical presentation of ‘important’ village families and clans and a romantic depiction of events and local customs, completes an altogether skewed overview.<sup>1</sup> ”

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<sup>1</sup> Prologue, page 13

Having rejected the “conventional” and rather safe approach of such predecessors, Moutoulas is by no means unaware of the challenges his methodology would endure. Quoting Athens Historian Spiro Asdrachas, he acknowledges that *“historical material acquires its value only by the inherent questions that we are to address it with”*<sup>2</sup>. From here onward, the usual problems commence:

“questions addressed to the historical evidence we are presented with, derive from an a-priori decision: Where to look for. What are we actually seeking; and what do we wish to discover (...). Which questions are to be written-off, what plans to jettison and which points to avoid.”<sup>3</sup>

In view of the above, it is clearly the author’s “privilege” to start his journey from about the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. His kick-off location is nearby *Zarafona*, a village some 10 miles (16km) east of Tsintzina village. The initial focal point there, is an early Christian basilica dedicated to the Assumption of our Lady Theotokos. This 5<sup>th</sup> C AD ruin is the first sign of human presence (*rather, of an organized society*) in the vicinity. From there, Moutoulas unfolds a solid trail of well-documented facts and events, to the first concrete evidence of an organized settlement in Tsintzina during the 13<sup>th</sup> century and to the strong indications of an organized society there *at least* but also perhaps *no more than* some 200-300 years before.

While this approach is academically sound, it begets the question why the author commenced his voyage in 5<sup>th</sup> century Zarafona some 10 miles East of Tsintzina, in preference to the undated but certainly much older ruins of a sizeable building at *Marmara* summit, a “mere” 2,5 miles (4km) to the opposite direction. This westerly location correlates significantly with the travel notes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> C. AD *Pausanias*<sup>4</sup> journey to Sparta. There, Pausanias describes a Mt. Parnon trail via the thick oak forest of *Skotita*<sup>5</sup> surrounding Zeus temple, the “Hermes” columns denoting the Kynouria - Lacaedemon (Spartan) border and several other terrestrial landmarks. Landmarks that have yet to be exactly located by archaeologists but should really lie within a radius of no more than 10-15 miles (16-25km) from Tsintzina village.

Moutoulas acknowledges that an uninterrupted human presence in this area from the early Helladic through the Roman period, is well documented from archaeological evidence.<sup>6</sup> Such evidence includes a well developed road network at very close range and witness accounts of tomb-shaped graves at the edge of Tsintzina village itself. The author instead, has used his academic judgment *against* a more direct implication of village history with an earlier date than the one selected.

First and foremost, the exact Pausanias 2<sup>nd</sup> Century trail remains to a large extent a matter of controversy. Despite human activity in the area well before the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD, it is rather erroneous to even suspect a Tsintzina settlement for another 900 to 1.000 years. On the contrary, once we establish links to a society in Zarafona no

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> A 2<sup>nd</sup> C. AD Greek historian and traveller

<sup>5</sup> A term which in the Greek language bears a strong connotation with *skotos* or “darkness”, perhaps indicative of a really dense forest nearby.

<sup>6</sup> p. 25

later than the 5<sup>th</sup> C AD, a logical and academically sound trail of facts can be inferred.

Having correlated the inferences of a rather significant basilica in Zarafona at such an early age with broader historical developments in the Sparta valley, the next significant stop is the acknowledgement of a strong and prosperous 11<sup>th</sup> Century AD settlement in Chrissafa, a village some 15 miles (25km) due south of Tsintzina and 12miles (18km) east of Sparta itself. In Chrissafa, ample historical evidence allows us to observe a well organized and stratified society as early as the 1300s and throughout the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Whilst Tsintzina itself appears initially as a mid-size settlement in a byzantine Decree of 1314 (*1292 or 1295 according to other researchers*), at the same time it appears significant enough in itself, to deserve a mention in the Decree<sup>7</sup> and also to have already developed "significant" families<sup>8</sup> during at least the mid 1300s.

Unlike more recent experience, the entire area throughout that period was quite sparsely populated, facing occasional demographic crises. Viewed from that perspective, Moutoulas acknowledges that the village (*and most of the vicinity*) appears to be showing a rather unprecedented dynamism only as recently as the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> It is at about this time that St. Anargiroi Monastery, a much older monastic complex some 2 miles (3,5km) to the village west, revives. Another nearby monastery, *St. Tessarákonda* to the village south, erects a new complex within its fields in 1615.

Within Tsintzina itself, St. Vlassios chapel is frescoed in 1611. Tsintzinian monks appear prominent in the ranks of the monastic community since the mid 1600s. A Tsintzinian clergyman submits himself as a candidate for *Archbishop of Lacedemonia* (today Diocese of Sparta) in 1697. During the brief Venetian rule interval of 1688-1715, a census records a Tsintzina population of some 144 in 46 families, making the village the 13<sup>th</sup> largest out of 53 belonging to the "*territorio di Crisaffa*."<sup>10</sup> The village also appears to make a disproportionately high contribution in men and taxes to the regional administration, clearly a sign of relative "affluence".

The author has decided to end Vol. I at the end of the Venetian rule of 1715. This as the subsequent period differs significantly to the centuries before. Unlike the slow pace of events in the six to eight preceding centuries, the village enters an accelerated path of growth on the last 100 years of Ottoman rule and as we approach the Greek revolution of 1821, in which it played a rather significant part. Post independence developments are also rapid. In many ways they are complex as well as unprecedented, meriting a different approach in a separate volume. As the author concludes on the period to 1715 covered in Vol. I, a significant Tsintzina milestone is its longstanding existence in itself:

"in the mosaic of the few and sparsely populated settlements of the broader area of Medieval Laconia, the *komi*<sup>11</sup> of Tsintzina appears like

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<sup>7</sup> p. 51-57

<sup>8</sup> p. 57

<sup>9</sup> Ch. 6, p.p. 70-75

<sup>10</sup> p. 81

<sup>11</sup> A Greek medieval term denoting a significant village, almost in terms of what could be called today a "small town".

the crown of a wide vicinity (...) away from the main centers of population. Its longstanding presence in time asserts to the *komi* a much greater substance of what can be inferred at the various archival sources, legal documents and inscriptions.

(...) Longstanding presence in time means above all, endurance to turbulence which various and uncontrollable factors have sustained over time to its core. We observe the evolution of a settlement which erects itself on a solid basis. A community with characteristics akin to those of the branch of a tree: Will bend in the presence of a strong wind but will not break. The old churches of the Tsintzinian society reflect above all its strong structural characteristics.

(...) The body, soul and intellect of this *komi*, ie the villager, man and woman, had an holistic participation to the technical civilization of its time. In other words, they had all necessary knowledge and expertise to obtain self-sufficiency at a time where no supreme carrier of welfare existed (...). At the same time, the villager ought to make a definite truce with the unexpected. As a prerequisite to learn to confront natural hazards, he acquired skills to avoid all "evil", as its consequences were often irreversible<sup>12</sup>.

In his concluding Vol. I words, Moutoulas reserves a rare insight to social aspects of early Tsintzinian societies. Aspects that to a large extent were preserved within living memory, such as the controlling of feelings to avoid tensions and the undesirable but also unavoidable long term consequences of what could be termed as "social cunningness" as a means of achievement. At the same time, the author is realistic enough to acknowledge the limitations of his research.

"We have to make terms with the fact that no historical society is open to us to an unlimited degree (...) How can you revive the sounds of a society which is irreversibly bygone. As the philosopher<sup>13</sup> says, 'from the traces of the heels on the ground you can make an inference as to the direction of the horse and the speed of its gallop, perhaps even the weight of its rider. But you can never be sure of what its rider was thinking as he was galloping away, whilst you will never know whether he was riding to his beloved one or to his death<sup>14</sup>'.

Moutoulas Pantelis: *"Tsintzina: A History of Village and Area"*, Vol. I, Zengler Editions, Athens 2008. Complete with Glossary, References and an archival documents section (156 pages), price: € 15.00

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<sup>12</sup> p.p. 109-110

<sup>13</sup> The reference is to the late Paris-based Greek Philosopher Cornelius Castoriades.

<sup>14</sup> p. 112