MANI

Community Profile

Geography

The term Mani Peninsula is used to define the central peninsula of the three which extend southwards from the Peloponnesus in southern Greece. To the east is the Laconian Gulf, to the west the Messenian Gulf. The peninsula forms a continuation of the Taygetos mountain range, the western spine of the Peloponnesus.
The terrain is mountainous and inaccessible. Until recent years many Mani villages could be reached only by sea. Today a narrow and winding road extends down the west coast from Kalamata to Areopoli, then south to Akrotainaro (the pointy cape which is the most southward soil of continental Greece) before it turns north until Gytheio.
However, the Mani in the frame of this case study will be considered the western bank of the peninsula, the so-called “Messinian Mani” and more specifically the municipality of Lefktron, which extends from the village Kampos to the village Agios Nikon.
History

Mani has a long and very important history.

Neolithic remains have been found in many caves along the Mani coasts. Homer refers to a number of towns in the Mani region, and some artifacts from the Mycenaean period have been found. The area was occupied by the Dorians in about 1200 BC, and became a dependency of Sparta. When Spartan power was destroyed in the 3rd century BC, Mani was self-governing for a time before being absorbed into the Roman Empire in the 2nd century BC.

As the power of the Byzantine Empire declined in the 9th century AD, the peninsula drifted out of the Empire's control. The fortress of Maini in the south became the area's centre. Over the subsequent centuries the peninsula was fought over by the Byzantines, the Franks, and the Saracens.

After the Fourth Crusade in 1204, Italian and French knights (known to the Greeks as Franks), occupied parts of the Peloponnese. In 1249, Mani was occupied by the Venetians, who made it one of the twelve baronies of the Principality of Morea and built the fortresses of Mystras, Passavas, Gustema (Beaufort) and Megali Maini.

In 1460, after the fall of Constantinople, Mystras fell to the Ottomans, but Mani was not subdued and retained its internal self-government in exchange for an annual tribute. Local chieftains or beys governed Mani on behalf of the Ottomans. As Ottoman power declined, the mountains of the Mani became a stronghold of the klephts, bandits who also fought against the Ottomans.

The last bey of Mani, Petros Mavromichalis, was among the leaders of the Greek War of Independence. He proclaimed the revolution at Areopoli on March 17, 1821. The Maniots contributed greatly to the struggle, but once Greek independence was won they wanted to retain their local autonomy. During the reign of Ioannis Kapodistrias, they violently resisted outside interference to the point of killing Kapodistrias.

The Mani's local autonomy was abolished in 1870, and the area gradually became a backwater as the inhabitants abandoned the land through emigration. It was not until the 1970s, when new roads led to the growth of the tourist industry, that the Mani began to regain population and become prosperous. Maniots were known for their obstinate character, conservative views, sometimes extreme frugality, and their zealous safeguarding of the family property.

Despite the region's aridity, Mani is known for its unique culinary products such as glina or syglino (pork or pork sausage smoked with aromatic herbs such as thyme, oregano, mint, etc. and stored in lard along with orange peel). Mani is also known for probably the world's best extra-virgin olive oil, soft-pressed from partially ripened olives of the Koroneiki variety that are organically grown on mountain terraces. The local honey is also of superior quality.
Today the Mani's coastal villages are full of cafés and souvenir shops. The peninsula attracts visitors for its Byzantine churches, Frankish castles, secluded sandy beaches and stunning scenery. Some popular beaches during the summer are Kalogria beach and the beaches by Stoupa harbor, while Kardamyli and Agios Nikolaos have nice pebble and sand beaches too. Furthermore, the famous towers of Mani (*pyrgospita*) are significant tourist attractions, and some offer accommodations for visitors.

The Diros stalactite and stalagmite caves, near Oitylon, are also a popular tourist destination; they are partly underwater and visitors tour them in gondola-like boats.

Gytheio, Areopoli, Kardamyli and Stoupa are filled with tourists during the summer months but the region quiets down during the winter months. Many inhabitants are still working as olive farmers, and thus many of the winter months are devoted to the olive harvest. Some of the villages in the mountains are less touristic and often have very few inhabitants. Mani is considered to be one of the most traditionalist and conservative regions of Greece, and is a stronghold of the right-wing New Democracy party.

There were fires in Mani in the summer of 2007 which have risen the concern about the protection of the environment and thus the protection of the well being of the local community.
**Olive oil**

Olive harvest is the main agricultural activity in this area, with many land owners’ and workers’ families depending on it. In this area (Municipality of Lefktro) there are about 10 mills. The 3 main ones are in the villages of Riglia, Agios Nikolaos and Neochori, which annually produce 150-300 tn of olive oil each. The whole area has an annual production of 500-800 tn. Local extra-virgin olive oil is considered by many to be the best in the world.
Olive oil production in the Mani Community*
The main variety of olive tree (the vast majority of olive trees) is “koroneiki” or as the locals call it “lianolia” which grows the small-sized olive fruit from which high quality olive oil is produced. There are also some trees of a variety the locals call “chondrolia” (thick olive) which grows medium sized eatable olives. Very rare in this area are olive trees of the “kalamon” (kalamata’s) variety which grow the large black eatable olives.

Mills usually produce the oil from an olive producer’s yield and keep a certain amount (percentage) as a payment which they then sell it usually in cans. There are no significant bottling facilities in the area.
Organic
There is some organic olive oil production, and a common belief that given the right incentives and motivation, producers will easily switch from non-organic to organic cultivation. There is also a production of nearly 100 tn of oil that is certified to be organic, although there are reasons to believe that this certification is not necessarily trustworthy as locals say that the checks are rare or never happen at all. It is worth mentioning that some olive production is compulsory to be organic because some olive trees are inaccessible to means of fertilization due to geography.

Labour
In recent years, many Albanians immigrants have come to live in the area. Today there are lots of Albanian families living, working and raising their children by working at the olive crops and in construction works. Land owners’ families hire these workers to help with pruning and olive harvesting. They usually pay them by day of work. Sometimes, depending on what the deal is, they provide them lunch and drinks during their work, machinery is available to help separate the olives from the branches and on the whole the working conditions are considered to be good. However the technical expertise of the workers is in many occasions poor. Pruning, for example, is considered to be a very important aspect of good and sustainable olive oil production, and though there are workers with the substantial know-how and skill, there are a lot who don’t, damaging the trees’ ability to grow much olive fruit, this having an effect on next year’s yield quantity. Sadly, as the younger people in
owners’ families tend to leave the area and not be interested in practical matters of olive farming, the know-how of the owners’ is also lessened and unable to pass to future generations of workers.

**Pests**

Pesticide use is widely practiced especially in rainy years. In cases when it doesn’t rain much, need for pesticide spraying is dramatically reduced as Dakos (the most common insect infection of the olive tree) needs a wet environment. If not attended properly, Dakos can spoil olive oil quality as the insect itself gets milled along with the olives that contain it.

**Our Contacts**

Alekos Kyvelos is the owner of the mill in Riglia and thus an important olive producers’ community representative. His son Makis Kyvelos is an architect who lives and works in the area along with his family (wife and three children). He is very concerned about environmental issues and also has great interest in preserving the well being of the local community and so expressing the views of the majority of local olive producers he is looking forward to seeing international markets open to local products.