

## Area 1: Interview with **Giorgos Margaritis**, land-owner

Margaritis was born in 1946 in Xanthi to a Maronite father and a Xanthiote mother of Eastern Rumelian origin. His father and uncles bought the land in question in 1937 off a Leonidas Kallergis who had bought it the previous year from a local *bey* to cultivate wheat but found it impossible to do so as it was right in the middle of a transhumance route with heavy use; Margaritis claims that at that time his (extended) family owned about 3000 goats, 1500 sheep, and 350 cattle, all of which were moved to the mountainous region of Papikio at the end of May each year. The route passed through Xylagani, which, in spring and autumn was plunged into a whirl of transient people and animals, spectacular enough to get the Komotinians hanging off their windows in amazement as it endlessly crossed the streets of their town (from 12 noon until 4 in the morning, according to Margaritis!). The moving of animals from Petrota to Papikio and vice versa was a huge project resembling more migration than livestock transportation, as it entailed the moving of most male members of a family and a substantial part of its household and employees (Pomaks, in their majority); women were “taken with” during the summer, when intensive milking and animal-tending requirements impeded their husbands’ visits home and required extra hands; indicatively, during the goat birthing and milking seasons (March and the summer, respectively), the work-force required was 60 people. At all other times, women remained at home, cooking, knitting, and raising their children, until the time came for the male ones to join their fathers and uncles – in the case of Margaritis, at the age of 12.

The Margaritises were the sole Maronite extended family to own land in the area (Maronite men were in their vast majority travelling merchants, whose being away from home for prolonged periods of time compelled their female relatives to lead very secluded lives for fear of being accused of impropriety; this, according to Margaritis, has earned Maronites the reputation of being inhospitable). Originally the land belonged to 4 nuclear families, which, by the time of the Axis invasion in 1941, when the area was deserted, had become 9 or 10. They all lived off their livestock: the milk, locally made into cheese, was taken to Komotini where, next to the Imaret, there was a structure Margaritis referred to as *psygeio* (an ice-house?), where it was stored before being sent to the markets of Thessaloniki and Athens; similarly, animals were locally slaughtered (at the suburban slaughterhouse of Hephastos) and their meat was shipped to the islands of Chios, Lesbos, etc. The number of the animals raised for their meat was so great that it took two to two-and-a-half weeks every year to slaughter them all. It is clear that Margaritis grew up in a rather wealthy family, and a happy one at that. Even today he treasures bucolic memories of peaceful mountainscapes soundtracked by livestock bells – “the best music there is” – and evenings of communal cooking, feasting, and talking with the fathers, uncles, and cousins.

This arcadian image was, according to Margaritis, disturbed by the Axis occupation of the area, which forced the Margaritises to gradually abandon it, and utterly devastated by the Civil War that followed it. The Agios Georgios acropolis, he says, was used as a hideout for guerillas, due to its numerous horizontal and vertical caves (the latter of which have claimed the life of quite a few of his goats; from one of the caves springs a stream with unusually sweet water, named *Şerbetli* (Turkish for “syrupy”), which the locals used for cooking beans and other legumes). The guerillas, he continues, who were not driven by ideology but were

misled and manipulated, burnt many houses and destroyed the land, causing more damage to the area than the Axis forces had altogether. He narrates the following incidents: (1) 350 cattle were gathered and slaughtered for the Bulgarian army at the Agios Eugenios peninsula; (2) a relative from Eastern Rumelia, name of Raphael, and his Margaritis' father, in an attempt to save part of their livestock, started travelling westwards with 1500 sheep and 3500 goats, respectively; Raphael was ambushed by the guerillas at Symbola, tied to a sycamore tree, and his flock was snatched, while Margaritis' father took his as far as Chalkidiki, only to bring back 300 goats when he returned. These were all that was left from their once pastoral empire when the war ended, and they had to put their lives together from scratch. Which, they did: the goats thrived and multiplied, earning the Margaritises a living. In 1969, Margaritis sold the last of his goats and left for Germany to work in the automotive industry. His land has been cultivated since, first by renters and more recently by his own son, Panagiotis, who plants cotton and wheat in it.

The building that is still visible today in the field was built by the Margaritis family in 1955, when the previous house that stood to its "left" collapsed. That house belonged to the *bey* who, according to Margaritis, lived there with his entire family until he sold the property. Margaritis has no memory of either the house or the *bey*. The purchase contract of the property is in Arabic and Margaritis, evidently proud of his rare possession, has offered to provide a copy and translation.

Margaritis' knowledge of the archaeology of the area is restricted to a rumour concerning the course of the ancient Via Egnatia, according to which the road passed by the radars, on the side of Askites, where one can see today mulberry trees and wine foot-presses, touched the corner of his property and proceeded towards the beach of Petrota. Several times during our interview he wished there had been antiquities in and around his property, which means that he is either not aware of the quite rich history of his land, as that is attested by the finds yielded by the surface survey, or that he chooses not to emphasize it for fear of having it expropriated by the state. Our conversation, apart from the recent history of the area, has highlighted the significance that this land holds for him as a place of memory, where both his own history and identity are (re)confirmed and (re)egotiated. Whatever else for would he take his grandchildren there every Sunday?