



Material Culture: Houses in Modern and Contemporary Messinia

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ABSTRACT: Messinia, located in southwestern Greece with an area of 2,991 square kilometers, is a separate geographical, historical, residential, and cultural unit in the southwestern tip of the Peloponnese. In this region, in modern times, houses are shaped by the so-called vernacular or popular architecture. They were not created through design processes, but spontaneously by experienced craftsmen, artisans, and less so by the users themselves. They improvised, utilizing their logic, experience, and sense of touch in the construction of houses. They "respected" nature, since they harmonized with the climatic conditions and the morphology of the area and only the materials existing in the area were utilized. Building on ephemeral streams (only during rainfall), torrents (seasonal flow and periodically rapid waters) and rivers (always show flow, but with significant fluctuations within the year) was avoided. The houses in Messinia were formed according to the social class and economic situation of the owners in medium (household houses), but also in mansions. Some were single-family houses or single-room small long, rectangular, parallelepiped stone buildings, without any particular form. Others were two-story, "two-story" or "anogokatoga", with a sloping, three-pitched roof and with the chimney at its lowest point, mainly in cases where the ground had sharp slopes. The most representative functional layout on the ground floor of a house in Messinia is that of the four-roomed room with four narrow windows compared to their height, vaulted and double-leafed. There was the *empati*, the hall, the chamber, the sleeping area and the kitchen, the auxiliary space, which ensured all the required functions of a house. The *empati* and the main and most important room, the hall, the "winter" or "sitting room" were laid with boards. In the kitchen, the housewife cooked in the stone fireplace or "tzakis", "paragoni", located in the middle of the western side.

KEYWORDS: traditional house, material culture, Messinia, Greece.

I. INTRODUCTION

Geographical data and natural environment of Messinia

Messinia, located in southwestern Greece covering an area of 2,991 square kilometres, is a distinct geographical, historical, residential and cultural entity at the southwestern tip of the Peloponnese. Its geographical relief is distinguished for its particular diversity, while its area corresponds to 14% of the Peloponnese, with valuable environmental wealth and rare biodiversity.

It borders the prefecture of Ilia to the north, the prefectures of Arcadia and Laconia to the east, while its coastline is washed by the Ionian Sea and the Messinian Gulf. Of the total area, 1,196 metres are mountainous, 750 are semi-mountainous and 1,045 are flat. The forested Taygetos, the highest mountain in the Peloponnese, with peaks such as Profitis Ilias (2,407 m), Neraidovouna (2,025 m) and Xerovouna (1,852 m), hinders communication between Kalamata and Sparta. In the northern and eastern parts of Messinia, there are smaller mountain ranges, the mountains of Kyparissia and the Vromovrysaika mountains, to the west and east respectively, while from north to south the area is crossed by Mount Tetrasi, Tetrasio or Nomia, Mount Ithomi and Mount Lykodimo, and the Lykaio Mountains (Figure 1).

The area is crossed by smaller and larger rivers with surface and underground waters that flow all year round. These are:

1. Nedas, at the northernmost tip of the prefecture, which originates from Lykaio (and Tetrasio) and flows into the Gulf of Kyparissia,
2. Velikas, which originates in the mountains of Kyparissia and flows into the Messinian Gulf (at Petalidi Bay),
3. Pamisos that originates from the northwestern slopes of Taygetos and flows into the Gulf of Messinia between Kalamata and Messini, in a marshy area. It is the largest river in Messinia, with a total length of approximately 44 kilometres. It supplies water to the fertile plains of Messinia, which is essential for olive cultivation, cereals and



other agricultural products, contributing decisively to the rural economy of the region. The river banks are rich in flora and fauna, with plane trees and natural vegetation creating a landscape of exceptional natural beauty. Pamissos is associated with the healing of young children in ancient times. At its mouth, a marshy wetland is formed with numerous different species of birds and other aquatic organisms,

4. The torrential Nedos River, the “river of Kalamata”, originates in the Alagonia region of western Taygetos and flows into the beach of Kalamata. Its floods in 1839

and 1924 caused extensive damage to the city [1].

The large and rich plain of Messinia is located in the centre of the prefecture and along the western coast. It is one of the most fertile agricultural areas in the country with favourable climatic conditions for the development of agriculture. In the second half of the 19th century, the vast majority of the inhabitants of Messinia, who were farmers, abandoned the mountain settlements and settled in the lowlands [2]. During this period, the rural economy was based on family farming and self-sufficient households (Figure 1) [2].



Figure 1: Geophysical Map of Messinia in 631/1968-69 manuscript from the Folklore Archive and Museum Collection of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, entitled “Folklore collection from the village of Manesi, Messinia, Province of Messini, Data from Poulitsio-Messinia”, created by Timotheos Giannakopoulos of Panagiotis.
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II. KALAMATA

The capital of the prefecture economic development in the early 20th century

In 1835, Kalamata, a provincial town, was declared by Otto to be the capital of the Prefecture of Messinia. At that time, it was in an extremely unfavourable position due to the long Ottoman rule, which was first imposed by Mehmed II (1470) and caused the destruction of most of the region's agricultural and livestock wealth.

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Kalamata developed into a prosperous provincial town. Mainly after 1860, due to the liberalization of trade by England and France and the increase in the trade of raisins and the processing of other agricultural products, it became an important coastal commercial centre for agricultural products of a transitory nature. This was helped by the increase in demand for agricultural products in European markets, the improvement of the road network, and the construction of the port,

despite the existing problems related to the lack of other infrastructure.

The economic development of the city led to a doubling of its population, the creation of new classes, and significant residential development. For the above reasons, after its liberation from the Ottomans, it expanded beyond the castle and the commercial centre to the square of the Holy Apostles. In the second half of the 19th century, due to the large commercial port and the port's commercial activity, the urban centre of ‘New Kalamata’ was created, developing the urban core that already existed.

The city experienced significant industrial development during the interwar period. Small-scale industrial units flourished, mainly linked to the “processing of agricultural products”. Far-sighted Messinian politicians realised earlier than others the developmental potential of private land ownership (Sakellariopoulos 1994b). Gradually, the silk industry (Malevri brothers, Kalogreon monastery, Stasinopoulos brothers, Christopoulos brothers), the



tobacco industry (Damylation brothers, Karelia brothers, K. Ptochoulis, I. Tsilibis, etc.), distilling (Wine and Spirits Company, Agricultural Industry SA), soap making and kernel processing (Linaraki). Economic growth continued until the third decade of the 20th century, despite the historical and political circumstances and intense economic fluctuations.

During this period of rapid population, economic, industrial and commercial growth, the first

town plan of Kalamata was drawn up in 1868. This city plan (1867) essentially reflected the existing situation of the old city, with the Nedonta River as its natural border to the west, extending southwards towards the sea. In other words, it depicted not only the medieval centre of the city, but mainly the settlements that were formed to meet the increased needs due to the ever-growing commercial and export trade via the sea route [3].

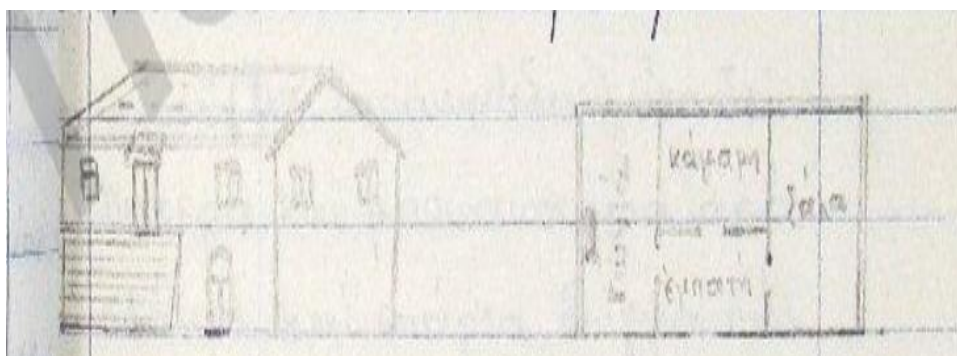


Figure 2: Farmhouse in Messinia and its floor plan in 1143/1970 manuscript from the Folklore Archive and Museum Collection of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, entitled “Folklore Elements of Poulitsio-Messinia”, created by Nikos Nikolopoulos and Georgia Saldari Nikolopoulou, Athens 1970. https://pergamos.lib.uoa.gr/uoa/dl/object/col_folkbooks

III. FOLK ARCHITECTURE

Farmers' houses in recent years in Messinia

Most of the farmhouses in Messinia are built in the so-called vernacular or popular architectural style. It draws on the centuries-old experience and building tradition of the Greeks and embraces a bioclimatic and sustainable approach. It is shaped spontaneously by empiricists, master builders, craftsmen and, to a lesser extent, the owners themselves, who improvise and do not follow strict pre-planning procedures, drawing on their logic, experience and intuition in the construction of buildings. They seek to maximize the economy of forces and resources. They fully respect the characteristics of the natural environment and use the diverse building materials of the region. They avoid building on ephemeral streams, which only exist during rainfall, or on seasonal torrents with periodic rushing waters, or on rivers, which always have a flow but with significant fluctuations throughout the year. The ideal location was considered to be one that was not sloping and did not have rocky stones. Folk architecture concerns public buildings, religious buildings, private buildings, residences, and industrial and agricultural buildings. The home is characterised as a ‘sacred’ place in the consciousness of the Messinians. The reconstruction of homes is completed with the formation of the residential fabric

[4].

Folk architecture is in complete harmony not only with the morphology of the area, but also with the climatic conditions. Messinia had mild winters, hot and dry summers, low rainfall and strong winds. For this reason, small openings were made in the buildings and narrow streets were created to provide protection from the winds and the intense summer sun, i.e. from the climatic conditions.

Houses in Messinia were designed according to the social class and financial status of their owners and are divided into folk houses, middle-class houses (noikokurios) and mansions. All houses are basic elements of every settlement.

The popular and middle-class houses were single-family or single-room houses, i.e. small, long, rectangular, parallelepiped or, more rarely, square, stone or brick buildings, without any particular aesthetic form, i.e. they are simple forms of housing. They were inhabited by populations that had a permanent productive relationship with the countryside, and are therefore examples of simple pre-industrial life. They have a well-designed, functional single-room core, organised with the criterion of comfortable living in a limited space (Figure 2 and 3).

The mansions were grand, complex or elaborate houses, larger in size, stone-built, two-



storeyed, with two floors or upper and lower floors. They had wooden balconies, other auxiliary buildings and were surrounded by high walls for security reasons. They were inhabited almost exclusively by large landowners or wealthy merchants when located in urban areas, such as Kalamata, or in semi-urban centres, such as Methoni, Koroni and Kyparissia.

The long side of the house faces north and

south, but the door is always on the south or south-east side, facing the sun. On the north side, solid walls were chosen, with only small openings for protection from the cold north winds. In several cases, there are northern walls made entirely of stone, with few or no openings, in contrast to the rest of the construction. Externally, the construction is simple, with no particular decorative elements.

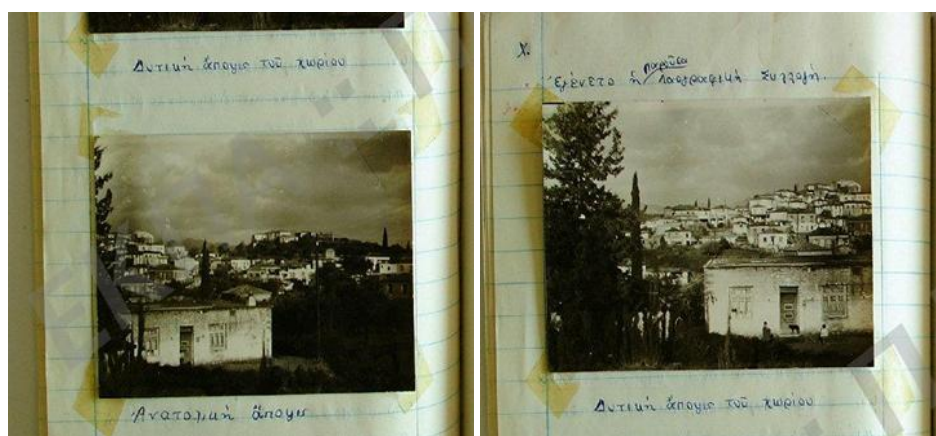


Figure 3: Photographs of houses in the village of Manesi, Messinia, in 631/1968-69, manuscript from the Folklore Archive and Museum Collection of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, entitled “Folklore collection from the village of Manesi, Messinia, Province of Messini, Data from Poulitsio-Messinia”, created by Timotheos Giannakopoulos of Panagiotis.
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The auxiliary buildings have a clearly defined use. These are outdoor ovens, stables and a laundry room (washing room). The distinction between the levels concerns the functional layout (Figure 4) exclusively of the upper floor with a sloping, three-sided roof and a chimney at its highest point, mainly in cases where there were steep slopes. The bedrooms and women's work areas were located in the upper floors. The upper floor housed the family's private life.

Often in the houses of Messinia there are apotropaic symbols for protection from evil intentions [5], [6], such as faces, fish and religious symbols, crosses. Crosses, an integral part of everyday life in Messinia, symbolize faith, redemption and divine protection, and are carved on the lintels of houses and the facades of churches. They were carved directly into the wall without first applying mortar and bear the abbreviations “IC XC NIKA”. They are often framed by saints who protect the family of the owners.

According to the floor plan (Figure 4), the most representative functional layout on the ground floor of a house in Messinia is that of a four-room house, which meets basic needs (housing people and animals and storing crops/harvest).

In this floor plan, the reception area, the *empati*, “*empadon*”, which functioned as an antechamber, is located to the east. On the left is the winter room, where the fireplace was located, and the dark room, which is considered a direct descendant of prehistoric types of dwellings.

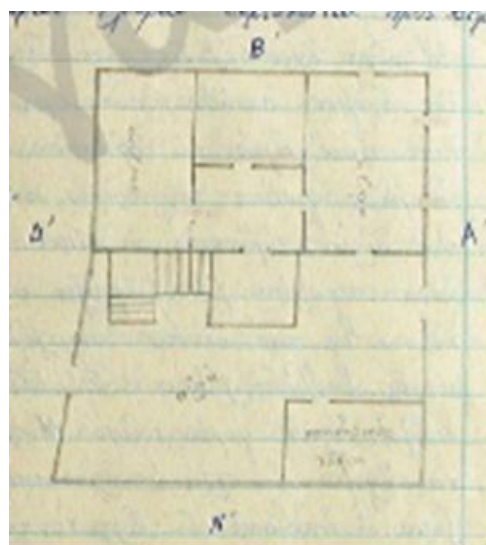


Figure 4: Floor plan of a house in 615/1968-1969



Manuscript from the Folklore Archive and Museum Collection of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Collection of folklore material from Dorion Trifylias, in the prefecture of Messinia. Collector: Aphrodite Katsampani, daughter of Nikolaos. https://pergamon.lib.uoa.gr/uoa/dl/object/col_fol_kbooks

Centrally, on the wall of the small side of the house, is the chimney, or 'corner', usually in the northern part of the dwelling. On the right side is the hall, the most formal room, where guests, relatives or friends were welcomed. It was also called the guest room. Then there was the usually western chamber, the bedroom, or cellar, i.e. the sleeping area, which was sometimes used as a storage room and kitchen, i.e. as an auxiliary space. They had low ceilings to retain heat and were covered with planks or had no floor, just earth. In the kitchen, the housewife cooked on the stone fireplace or on the "tzakis", "paragoni", located in the middle of the western side. The kitchen was covered with compacted earth to prevent fire and was used as a bedroom, dining room, kitchen, and workroom. These rooms provided all the necessary functions of the house.

On the upper floor, there were two or three rooms, which were used as bedrooms because the space was kept warmer. The rooms were separated by wooden partitions with wooden walls, i.e. connected boards called 'mesandras'. The partitions were made of reeds placed upright on thin nailed boards, a wooden frame, which were connected and coated with mud, i.e. plastered, and were called "tsatmades" or "tsatouma".

The floors consisted of wooden beams of various cross-sections, which were supported either directly on the masonry or via longitudinal beams, so as to ensure proper load distribution on the wall. They were placed on the masonry every 40-50 cm. The gaps between the beams were bridged with thick, wide boards, which also formed the floor. The wooden beams of the floor were often supported by columns arranged parallel to each other. In houses with ceilings, thin boards were used. The ceiling was painted with oil paint at the end of the 20th century, when building materials began to be imported from Europe to Messinia.

The basement/semi-basement was designed to provide better foundations and prevent subsidence. However, it also provided large storage spaces and a safe refuge for family members in times of danger. When the site was on a steep slope, the basement occupied two different levels. The

basement was divided into two rooms by a partition, and stone arches were often built, which were used for stabling animals (horses, mules, donkeys, goats, sheep). The wall was shaped to form roosts for the chickens to roost in during the winter. This room had only one window facing south, so that the animals would not get cold when the north wind blew. In the other room in the basement, there were storage areas for food. In the basement, a separate area was created by weaving mats, ferns, dusika plane trees and reeds, where straw and grass were placed for the animals.

The house was the main asset of the Messinian family and was passed on to the firstborn son after his marriage. For this reason, in most cases, the new couple moved to the groom's parental home after the wedding. The 'dowry' of the house, i.e. the relevant household items and movable objects, was an essential obligation of the parents towards their daughters. Its size reflected the economic and social status of each family and the corresponding expectations for the development of social relations.

In the poorer families of Messinia, who had no other property, cash or other sons, they would give their first daughter their house as a dowry. The parents would move out and either build a small room in the courtyard of the house and keep it for themselves or build somewhere else. For this reason, many houses were not passed down from father to son, but from mother to daughter and from father-in-law to son-in-law. If the daughter happened to die young or without children, the house was inherited by the son-in-law, who would bring his second wife to live there, because the parents of the first wife, who had lost their child, also lost their home. Agreements began to be made – and this is still the case today – whereby the house was given as a dowry to the daughter, but they also lived there until their death. In most cases, the elderly were confined to the ground floor, while the son-in-law and daughter lived in the upper part of the house. In this case, the son-in-law has no right to sell the house [7]. Therefore, the share that the girls of the family received (either as a dowry or as an inheritance) was smaller or larger than the share that the boys received.

According to testimony from the village of Triodos in Messinia, mutual assistance between families in the community applied only to agricultural work and not to other cases, such as building houses. Houses in Messinia in the 19th and 20th centuries were an element that demonstrated people's relationship with their material environment, their place and landscape, their immersion in their environment and their lifeworld.

IV. STOVE AND OVEN IN HOMES OF MESSINIA

In Messinia, all houses from the 19th and 20th centuries had their own oven and/or fireplace (paragoni), which was used for heating and cooking. They were an integral part of every home, due to both the cold climate and the prosperity of its inhabitants, thus influencing its functions and layout (Figure 5).

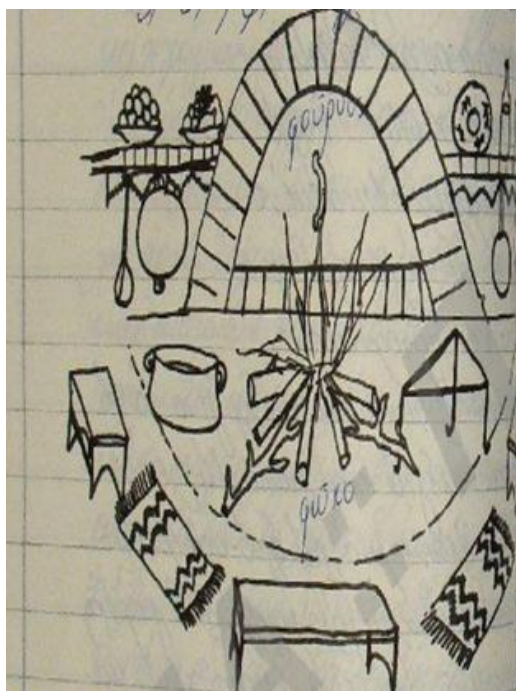


Figure 5: Fireplace, oven and essential utensils in a farmhouse in Messinia in 1293/1971 Manuscript from the Folklore Archive and Museum Collection of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, entitled “Collection of folklore material from Proasteio, in the prefecture of Messinia”, created by Aphrodite Koumparakis.
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It was mainly located in the middle of the room's wall opposite the entrance, thus defining its uses and shaping its organization, as it served as its axis of symmetry. In terms of construction, the back of the fireplace and the chimney were integrated into the stone wall. Small wooden seats were placed around it. It may have been separated from the rest of the room by a wooden partition. It was decorated with embroidery called “tzakopano”.

Near the fireplace is the vaulted, semi-circular or hemispherical oven, if it was not in the courtyard.

The opening of the oven is semi-circular. The semicircle before the construction is created with an iron ring, approximately 6 centimeters wide. Small stones or pieces of bricks and tiles (cut tiles) are used in the construction. The interior of the oven has two openings:

- The mouth, formed by a horizontal stone supported on two vertical stones called brioflia. This is where the branches were placed, which were burned to heat the oven and then bake whatever was placed inside;
- the anipnia, which is the mouth of a clay pipe that ends at the top or back of the dome. It is closed to the outside with a small plate. It was constructed to prevent dangerous overheating.

This forms a dome with a diameter of approximately 1.20 m, resting on a solid base approximately 60 cm high, which is covered with slabs inside the oven, forming a flat surface, a large stone slab on which a fire is lit for cooking and heating.

A 1-metre-high and approximately 1.20-metre-deep ledge runs along the entire length of the wall, so that five or seven baking trays and eight loaves of bread, which are a staple of the Messinian diet, can be baked. Along the ledge and on the front under the flat surface, there are four small open “cupboards”. These were covered with a small piece of cloth and used to store dishes, glasses and other small items, such as matches, sugar, jugs, bowls, oil jars, jars of salted pork, two smaller jars of olives, vinegar, and the old salt barrel, in which eggs were also placed for preservation. On the ledge are placed the oil press, the baking trays, the tenzere (wooden spoons), various useful objects, such as briques, mortars, etc.

Poles were fixed to the right and left ends of the ledge on the wall. Braids of onions and garlic, oregano and bay leaves were hung on them. From the patero, the large beam of the roof, a small 1.50 m long board was hung with a rope, on which cheese and various edible items were placed, and then another rod from which the “sausages” were hung during Carnival. The board and the rod are the ideal place for safety, as rodents and other domestic animals cannot reach them. In the corner, there is a wooden box with flour, which is well covered and on top of which is placed the bowl where they kneaded the dough.

At the end of the bench and above it on the right side of the wall, there is another “cupboard”, which is “iconostasis” of the house. There, they placed an icon of the Virgin Mary and Saint George. In front of it was a small lantern or oil lamp that illuminated them.



Underneath the oven was the ash pit, where they collected the ashes, and a large cupboard for storing necessary items (Figure 6). Anything that did not fit in the cupboard was placed in the space. These were fire tongs, tripods for placing pots on the fire, the masia, an iron household utensil for removing and stirring the ashes and coals, the paddle with which they threw the loaves into the oven, and the wood. Ovens could be located indoors (Figure 6) or outdoors (Figures 7 and 8).

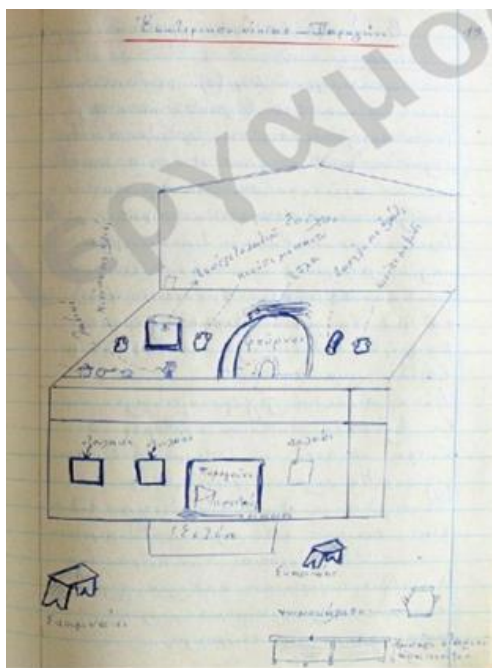


Figure 6: Oven and essential utensils in a farmhouse in Messinia in 1293/1971 Manuscript from the Folklore Archive and Museum Collection of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, entitled “Collection of folklore material from Proasteio, in the prefecture of Messinia”, created by Aphrodite Koumparaki.
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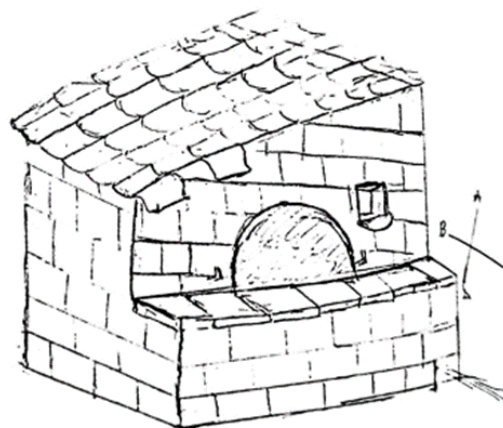


Figure 7: Outdoor oven at the home of Vasilis Tsokas, in Manuscript 1378A, pp. 84-85, Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens from the folklore mission of Georgia Tarsouli to Koroni (4 July - 15 August 1938).



Figure 8: Oven inside the courtyard of a house in the village of Pyrgos, province of Trifilia, Messinia, Manuscript from the Folklore Archive and Museum Collection of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, entitled “Collection of folklore material from Pyrgos, province of Trifilia, prefecture of Messinia”, created by Theoni Konstantopoulou, p. 14.
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The Messenians believe that fire, both in the fireplace and in the oven, is a mysterious and sacred element that warms, illuminates and protects the home from natural and supernatural enemies, from



the cold and disease-causing germs, but also from demons. Ashes also have a protective character, since on Epiphany they are scattered in the corners and around the house to drive away goblins, insects and other evil spirits [8].

V. CONCLUSION

Therefore, these folk houses not only preserve many designs, forms and architectural methods of past centuries, often primitive, and can therefore provide rich and important material for archaeology, the history of architecture and, more generally, historical research into human habitation and human civilization as a whole, but most importantly, they continue to be one of the most significant manifestations of the life and soul of the people [9]. It is confirmed that the home “is the house (a) place(s), (a) space(s), emotion(s), practices and/or an active state of existence in the world” [10].

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