Original Study

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Records and Transformations of Memories in the Cultural Landscape of Idomeni (Kilkis, Northern Greece)

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Abstract: Following recent excavations and geophysical prospection at Idomeni in the Kilkis prefecture of Northern Greece, this paper attempts to reconstruct through digital means, the tangible and intangible vestiges of historical episodes that come together to form multiple narratives of a diachronically terra incognita site, gradually unlocking its hidden secrets. The digital documentation and processing, with the use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS), of the spatial remains associated with historical episodes demonstrate the ways in which space at Idomeni was used within a multifaceted, diachronic framework. It is a place that is constantly being transformed over the past 7000 years from a seemingly “peaceful” agricultural community during the Neolithic period to a burial ground for a still invisible Middle Byzantine settlement, and finally, as a place of violence having been one of the battlefields of the First World War. The story of Idomeni has only recently been concluded as the theatre of a dramatic influx of modern refugees. Thus, the “multilayered” identity of a mnemonic place with various representations of the past unfolds: on one hand the distant eras, such as the still unknown Neolithic and Middle Byzantine period, and on the other, the relatively recent “traumatic” (war-related) past. Within the specific historical context of the First World War, this paper discusses the management of memories of locals and non-locals, e.g. the disappearance of entire settlements, or the emergence of new toponyms related to the protagonists and their actions during the war in the area of Idomeni remaining in the memory of locals today.

Keywords: Idomeni, Historical landscape, Excavation, Geophysics, Digital mapping

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1 Introduction

This paper discusses the historical landscape south of the small village of Idomeni in the prefecture of Kilgis in Northern Greece, which was investigated by recent archaeological and geophysical research carried out in the area¹, as well as by archival cartographic research and GIS spatial analysis. Of particular interest in this landscape is the archaeological site that was discovered twelve years ago, by chance, during the construction of a new road, 1.5 km southeast of the modern village of Idomeni and 1.3 km from the western banks of the Axios River, at the foot of Mount Pike.

Prior to archaeological research, the site was unknown, and road construction had destroyed a significant part of it. Small scale rescue excavations were first carried out in 2007 by the 16th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities (Valla & Micha, 2010) and later in 2015 (by the Ephorate of Antiquities of Kilgis) (Chatzitoulousis, in press) (see fig. 1).

Excavations were followed by a geophysical survey of the area in 2017, carried out jointly with the Geophysical – Satellite Remote Sensing and Archaeo-environment Laboratory of the Foundation for Research and Technology, Rethymno, Greece (Sarris et. al., 2019) (see fig. 2, 3, 4).

Certain aspects of the history of Idomeni's landscape surrounding the archaeological site were further explored by archival cartographic research, digital mapping and spatial analysis to better associate the archaeological data that emerged from the fieldwork (both excavations and geophysics) with the historical data provided by archival military maps² (Savvaidis & Demertzis, 2017).

It should be stressed at this point that the location of the modern village of Idomeni differs from the location of the ancient city of Idomenai (Ἰδομεναί, Ἰδομένη, Οἰδομενές),³ which is believed to lie near the modern town of Isar (Исар) Marvinci (Марвинци) (Škokljević & Škokljević, 1996; Savvopoulou, 2015, p. 121), a little further north of the modern settlement of Gevgelija and to the southwest of Valandovo (Валандово), along the eastern banks of the Axios river in North Macedonia (see fig. 5).

According to the results of the interdisciplinary research, the landscape of Idomeni has been continuously evolving. The area was originally a place of habitation during the Late Neolithic period, but it became a residential and burial space in the Middle Byzantine period. Still later, Idomeni became the theater of military operations during the First World War, and, most recently, evolved into such a transitional place of organized human mobility as a refugee camp.

Following mostly a landscape-biographical approach (Roymans et. al., 2009), the landscape of Idomeni is examined in this paper as a “story, a chronicle of life and dwelling” (Ingold, 2000, p. 189; Adam, 1998, p. 54), or else, as the “continuous collection of the different micro-histories of several places” (Kobayashi, 1989; Kolen & Renes, 2015) throughout its historical layers. Given the inherent instability of places and their diverse meaningfulness perceived by different groups and people in multiple ways, this biographical approach adopts a deep map orientation seeking to detect, under its phenomenal tranquility, the multiple and slippery identities of place, in which the human (collective and personal) experiences possess a vital position (Chesnokova et. al., 2018; Taylor et. al., 2018). Those individual places of Idomeni's area, integrated into the same cultural landscape, constitute specific individual sites of memory, possessing communal and/or individual biographies, each one carrying different materialized embodied perceptions and mnemonic experiences (Nora, 1984; Ingold, 1993; Barrett, 1994; Kealhofer, 1999, p. 61; Bender, 1998, p. 87; Jones, 2007).

1 The co-operative project of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Kilgis, Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports and the Institute of Technology and Research was implemented through a Programmatic Convention for Cultural Development and financed by the Region of Central Macedonia. We would like to thank Mr. Andreas Vergidis, Regional Vice Governor of the Region of Central Macedonia (Regional Division of Kilgis) and Ms. Xanthippi Soupli, chairman of the local community of Idomeni, for their warm support, as well as the owners of the fields for their consent to the investigation.

2 The military maps were granted by the Service of the General States Archives – Historical Archives of Macedonia, located in Thessaloniki.

3 Stéphanos Byzántios, *Ethnica*, 326.13: «...Ἰδομεναί πόλις Μακεδονίας...» [“...Idomenai polis Makedonias – Idomenai city of Macedonia...”], *Ethnica*, 261.10: «...Εἰδομένη, πόλις, Μακεδονίας...», [...] “Idomeni, polis, Makedonias – Idomeni, city of Macedonia...”], Thucydides *Historia*, II, 100.3: «...ὁ δὲ στρατός τῶν Θρακῶν ἐκ τῆς Δοβήρου ἐσέβαλε πρῶτον μὲν ἐς τὴν Φιλίππου πρότερον οὖσαν ἀρχήν, καὶ εἰλεν Εἰδομένην μὲν κατὰ κράτος...» [“...o de stratos ton Thrakon ek tis Dovirou esevale proton men es tin Filippou proteron ousan arhin, kai eilen Idomenin men kata kratatos - «...the army of Thrakians from Doviros intruded firstly in Philip's previous authority and looted Idomeni completely].

Figure 1. The rescue excavation at Idomeni in 2015 (archive of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Kilkis, photo Stamatis Chatzitoulousis).

Figure 2. Geophysical survey: systems of multiple magnetometer data used at Idomeni (EGSA 1987, Greek national Grid).

Figure 3. Geophysical survey surrounding the archaeological site at Idomeni (EGSA 1987, Greek national Grid).

Figure 4. The archaeological site and the geophysical survey area near Idomeni (WGS 1984, WebMercator Auxiliary Sphere).

Figure 5. Isar Marvinci and modern Idomeni (WGS 1984, WebMercator Auxiliary Sphere).

A detailed presentation of the landscape's entire historical path exceeds the limits and objectives of this paper. Specific historical periods focusing on the region surrounding the archaeological site, namely from the Neolithic period up to the recent past, each of which represents a different use of the landscape, instead were deliberately and indicatively selected. The discussion here develops by positioning its lens on the element of continuous transformation (Haaland & Haaland, 2011) of the socio-cultural identity (Thomas, 2012) of Idomeni's landscape, "fluid over the trajectories of Olife" (Meskell, 2001, p. 189), by detecting material imprints of its multifaceted human use (residential, funeral, military, transitory social group movement) over the centuries. It thus seeks to explore the specific contexts of the meaningful perceptions (Dretske, 1995; Jones, 2006) of the landscape, that is the collective perception of landscape values according shared meaningful ideals (experience, emotion, etc.), in four different historical periods and social circumstances. Even more, this paper attempts to comment on the element of the ephemeral nature of visibility or durability of (collective) social memory's (in terms of recording information, of recalling a memorial, of remembering) (Beiner, 2018) materialization regarding the individual historical sites of the cultural landscape.

Of particular interest in this case study is the fact that among the individual historical episodes unfolding in specific places of the same landscape, there is an extended period of gradual eradication of material imprints and the resulting meaningfulness that was inscribed in this landscape. Consequently, there is a period of obsolescence of past historical episode, before the coming of the next one. This deletion of the individual narratives of space that occurred at Idomeni seems to arise with the abrupt interruption of its specific use over the long course of time, sometimes in a violent or dramatic way, after disastrous processes, as we will see below, when examining in detail the history of the landscape. In other words, the renegotiation of the landscape's meaningfulness as well as the transformation of its identity (Stobbelaar, 2011) presumably results without any perception by its contemporary local inhabitants of the, recorded or not, materiality of the landscape's past history. Any such renegotiation or transformation thus, seem to happen, instead, just by coincidence on the same landscape.

In this specific case of the built environment in Idomeni area in Northern Greece, it seems that although it constitutes a timelessly transformed arena of social action, at the same time it reconciliates attributes of remembrance or forgetfulness regarding the past social action on its terrain (Hamilakis, 2013), containing mostly, traces of events, which are physically or intentionally obliterated, forgotten, repressed by collective memory or never intended to be remembered. The intentional or not but still rather flimsy residues of either the Neolithic or the byzantine settlement and yet, of the modern refugee camp seem to leave a scant and probably invisible record to the future landscape's profile. Instead, regarding especially, the sacred traces of this landscape, these are particularly detectable in certain historical episodes during its on-going historical development, as in the case of the mid-Byzantine funerary practices or in the post-World War I memorial monuments of the Macedonian Front, constituting different ceremonial "memory performances" (Peterson, 2013, p. 277; Yoffee, 2007, p. 15) or "memory acts" (Lucas, 2005, p. 133) as key references to specific religious and historical circumstances respectively, (re)creating the life history of the place (Crawford, 2007, p.15).

Similar elements of sacredness or sanctity are not equally visible and materially traceable with respect to other historical episodes, such as in the aforementioned case of Neolithic habitation, although these might not necessarily be excluded from the specific use of the landscape, even though their materiality is not overtly registered in the landscape. The apparent lack of ritual attributes from the settlements' archaeological record does not necessarily imply the complete absence of such elements, but it could mean that ritual could not be performed in a prominent way, incorporated together with a daily profane livelihood (Barrett, 1991) in the built environment, into an overall cosmological view of the Neolithic community, relative to its concepts of memory, past, ancestors, belonging and generational continuity.

To sum up, the following discussion aims to highlight the crucial significance of the narrative approach for the archaeological – scientific "reading the text" of this cultural landscape, through which diverse stories from the life-history of this landscape might be developed (Heilen, 2005).

2 Narrative 1: The Neolithic Settlement

On the slope of a low natural plateau (53 masl), within the margins of the alluvial deposits of the Axios River, the fragmented settlement remains of a Late Neolithic farming community cover an area of about 0.4 hectares.

Along with the nearby Bronze Age settlements on the Vardarski Rid hill in North Macedonia and the southeastern tell-site at Evzonoi, the Late Neolithic site of Idomeni constitutes, until today, the only indication of prehistoric habitation in this region (see fig. 6).

The settlement belongs to the type of the so-called flat settlement with a horizontal habitational pattern, which seems to be the predominant type in this region of central Macedonia and the southern Balkans during the Late Neolithic period. We cannot know the full extent of the settlement because of the severe destruction caused by the road construction. However, based on the spatial distribution of surface material in the broader area, we estimate the Neolithic settlement at Idomeni to extend over approximately 1.2 hectares, indicating a relatively small settlement area. This contrasts with the extended flat sites which appeared during the same period (mid sixth – beginning of the fifth millennium BC) in central Macedonia, filling, together with tells, a previously, apparently, empty landscape, in which (sites) domestic structures seem to be aggregated into often hugely expanding flat spreads (Bailey, 2000, p. 169; Grammenos, 1991) (see fig. 7a–b, 8).

Figure 6. The prehistoric habitation in the broader landscape surrounding the survey area (WGS 1984, WebMercator Auxiliary Sphere).

Figure 7. Handmade pottery sherds from the excavation of the Neolithic settlement in 2015 (archive of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Kilikis, photo Stamatis Chatzitoulousis).

Figure 8. The rescue excavation in 2015 at Idomeni (archive of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Kilkis, photo Stamatis Chatzitoulousis).

The indications that have emerged from the results of the combined application of magnetic, electromagnetic, electrical and GPR surveys (Sarris *et al.*, 2019) suggest that the Neolithic habitation was limited to the hilly terrain on which excavations have been carried out.

The recognition at Idomeni of two successive habitation phases (Valla & Micha, 2010, p. 339) might suggest a possible long-lived occupation in the same area rather than the type of short-lived settlements or seasonal⁴ (camp-type) habitation widespread elsewhere in Macedonia and the Balkans, quite often in agriculturally more marginal parts of the landscape and following a shifting habitation pattern (Halstead, 1999; Halstead, 2000, p. 119; Pappa, 2007, p. 261).

At the intra-community level, the structural elements of the social space of the Neolithic habitation, as revealed by excavation, include 21 subterranean constructions, implying that the domestic architecture is dominated by pits. These are carved into the soil trenches with an ellipsoidal or circular plan and slightly sloping walls that gradually expand in depth. The diameters of the structures range from 0.80 m up to 3.00 m and they have a depth of between 0.40 m to 0.90 m. Their superstructures are not preserved, but it is estimated that they were formed with light thatching material coated with clay. The largest of the subterranean pits seem to be residential spaces of domestic units in the settlement. This was a very popular type of building construction in the Neolithic settlements of the southern Balkans (Pappa & Besios, 1999). The smaller pit-like features may have served alternative, auxiliary needs, e.g. storage or waste facilities. The spatial organization of the Neolithic community's social space at Idomeni includes a dense arrangement of the semi-subterranean domestic constructions, suggesting possible housing clusters. But at the same time, there is a scattered layout with intermediate open spaces between and around the residences, suggesting distinct units (Pappa, Nanoglou, & Efthimiadou, 2017, p. 50; Pappa, 2007, p. 261).

The site of Idomeni belongs to the group of the Late Neolithic settlements in central Macedonia with no prior evidence of activity. Its establishment in an area with low hilly terrain accords with the wider tendency of most Late Neolithic communities in the southern Axios area where there is a preference for locations on smooth crested slopes or peaks beyond the flood zones of the river basin. The lands in these territories usually sustain potentially medium or high productivity levels. Due to the subterranean dwelling units, this relationship is equally characterized by the low visibility of the social space from a long distance, in the context of the wider environment during the community's life cycle, and by its elliptical detectability

⁴ The problem of seasonality is specifically related to the flat settlements that are provided with pit-dwellings, in contrast to the tell settlements that are regarded as sedentary and consist of a compact layout with rectilinear structures (Pappa, 2007, p. 261).

in subsequent years⁵.

The element of monumentality, which characterizes the other basic morphological type of Neolithic settlements, i.e. tells, acting as an ideological mechanism, a technique of persuasion, and a narrative for the changing social reality, is altogether lacking from the flat and extended sites (Halstead, 2006; Kotsakis, 1999). Instead, in those latter settlements, lineage and descent appear to be less stressed, and seem to be defined on a communal basis, stemming from the collective community's perception (Jones, 2006) about the relationship it develops with the past (Van Dyke & Alcock, 2003, p. 6), i.e. the collective management by the community of social memory, and not on the idealized place of the household, the locus so to speak of the deeper conflict within Neolithic social structure (Kotsakis, 1999, p. 74) (see figs. 9, 10, 11).

Figure 9. Structural (pit like) features in the area of the Neolithic site at Idomeni (WGS 1984, WebMercator Auxiliary Sphere).

⁵ The preservation and visibility of the inconspicuous form of neolithic flat-extended settlements might have been affected by several factors, such as landscape degradation by farming, terrace construction, often by heavy machinery (Frederick & Kracht-opoulou, 2000), serious erosion of the sites situated on the hills or by the creation of large alluvial deposits in the lowlands (Westley & McNeary, 2014).

Figure 10. Further structural features detected by the geophysical investigation close to the Neolithic site (WGS 1984, WebMercator Auxiliary Sphere).

Figure 11. Further structural features detected by the geophysical investigation in the area close to the Neolithic site (EGSA 1987, Greek national Grid).

3 Narrative 2: Cemetery of Mid-Byzantine Times

Based on the excavation finds, the same location was re-used, subsequent to the Neolithic habitation, as a ritual – funerary place in the Middle Byzantine period. The collective ritual behavior and action (e.g. rites of passage, cults, sacred ceremonies) or potentially beliefs and perceptions (religion, ancestors, personhood, gender, etc.) of the mid Byzantine community regarding the honoring of the dead, through such performance practices of remembering (Schechner, 2002; Bell, 1992, pp. 42–3) as mortuary treatments and votive deposition (Van Dyke & Alcock, 2003, p. 5), are inscribed on that landscape of death or deathscape (at that period) as a “ritual sediment”. That landscape was shaped not only as a sensory memory-scape, but also as continuously (re)creating archive of time and place (Parker Pearson & Shanks, 2001, pp. 64–65; Hamilakis, 2013).

More specifically, seven pit-like burial features presenting common characteristics were unearthed in the eastern half of the Neolithic habitation area. Six scattered graves were identified in 2007 (Valla & Micha, 2010), and the outline of a rectangular-shaped structure, most likely a grave-like feature in 2015, as well (Chatzitoulousis, in press). Some of the graves had truncated the Neolithic deposits. In these burials, the head of a deceased man was facing west with arms folded over his chest. These burial structures form part of a cemetery, which should extend further to the southern and southeastern slopes of the hill. According to the scattered finds in the area around the burials, the cemetery dates to the Middle Byzantine period (10th–12th centuries⁶) (Valla & Micha, 2010, pp. 340–341, figs. 4, 6, 8; Antonaras, 2012, p. 120, fig. 5) (see figs. 12, 13).

Figure 12. Bronze rings of Middle Byzantine period from the excavation in 2015 (archive of the Ephorate of Antiquities at Kilkis, photo Stamatias Chatzitoulousis).

Figure 13. Glass bracelet of Middle Byzantine period from the excavation in 2015 (archive of the Ephorate of Antiquities at Kilkis, photo Stamatias Chatzitoulousis).

⁶ In large areas of Section A of the excavated (2007) site, deposits were distorted with minimal pottery of the prehistoric settlement and the majority with findings, such as abundant tile and brick fragments, shells, metallic small items such as iron nails and tools, but no architectural remains. In a research section in this area a large trench was found deeper than the prehistoric trenches. The findings of these regions date back to the 10th–12th c. A.D. (Valla & Micha, 2010, pp. 340–341, figs. 4, 6, 8).

Remains of stone-built wall foundations were also found close to the north of the cemetery, indicating the presence of a settlement, probably contemporary with this. However, the area has not yet been investigated in detail.

During the Middle Byzantine period, Idomeni was part of a wider geographical area of crucial importance, between the Danube and the southern Balkans, Constantinople and the Adriatic Sea, on land and waterways of communication and circulation. In the context of a new administrative reconstitution of the Macedonian geographic area, Idomeni falls under the administrative entity of Thessaloniki, along with other cities. Ecclesiastically, Idomeni belongs to the bishopric of Vardariotes and besides, in the “theme” (geographical unit) of the Vardarite Turks, who appeared during the 11th century⁷.

Furthermore, accumulations of a high density of construction material, possibly burned or baked mudbrick, residues most probably of the more recent past pointing to an area of building activity, were detected during the geophysical survey in the subsoil of the surrounding areas. From the magnetic gradiometry survey, rectangular or square features were found scattered over a wide area, being separated from possible road features⁸ (see fig. 14).

Figure 14. Structural features possibly of the Middle Byzantine settlement at Idomeni (WGS 1984, WebMercator Auxiliary Sphere).

⁷ Constantinus VII Porphyrogenitus mentions in his work *De Thematis* (Γ. 49. 50): «...Επαρχία Μακεδονίας (α) υπό κονσιλάριον, πόλεις λ(β) Θεσσαλονίκη, Πέλλα, Εύρωπος, Ἰδομένη [Idomeni], Βράγυλος κ.ά.» [«...Ephoria Makedonias (a) upo konsilarion, poleis l(b) Thessaloniki, Pelli, Europos, Idomeni, Vragulos k.a. - Province of Macedonia under consulate, cities l(b) Thessaloniki, Pella, Europos, Idomeni, Vragulos etc] (Chatziantoniou, 2007, p. 154).

⁸ Structural remains of either the Neolithic settlement (pit structures) or the graves of the Middle Byzantine period are detected by the geophysical survey mainly to the east of AREA 2, in the area of recent archaeological excavations, that is, the center of the Neolithic settlement.

After reviewing, through georeferencing, historical maps of the 19th century and military maps of the First World War period suggest that there were no habitation traces in the area of and surrounding the archaeological site during the post-byzantine/Ottoman period. Based on this observation, we speculate that the features identified in the geophysical survey located near the above-mentioned stone-built wall foundations constitute the latest habitation episode in the area of the archaeological site and may be attributed to a Byzantine era settlement, probably connected to the Middle Byzantine cemetery. Certainly, confirming this hypothesis requires further on-site fieldwork.

The existence in the broader area and to the north of the archaeological site, of a settlement called Sechovo⁹ (today's Idomeni), is recorded only since the middle of the 16th century (1568/1569). The identification of Idomeni with a specific settlement of the Byzantine or Ottoman period is not yet possible, but one could hypothesize a possible relocation of the byzantine-era settlement detected in the archaeological site under question to the area of modern day Idomeni (see fig. 15).

Figure 15. The landscape with Muslim settlements. The landscape as a theater of military operations August 1916 before the operations at Dogani Hill (Mamelon du Chemin de Fer) and Ravine Height (Source of military map: Salonika Campaign Society, WGS 1984, WebMercator Auxiliary Sphere).

4 Narrative 3: Theater of Military Operations

A common feature of Idomeni's place during its more recent history is the frequent alterations of its social and demographic identity and the fact that it has often been transformed into an extremely dramatic place of violence. The site constituted the theater of successive catastrophic attacks and occupations during the troubled times of the 1821 national uprising (Chionidis, 1971), the Macedonian Revolution of

⁹ or «Σέοβο», Σέχοβο, Сехово или Сеово / Ειδομένη, Sechovo, Seovo, Ceovo, Džeochovo.

1878 (Vakalopoulos, 1981)¹⁰, the Macedonian Struggle (1904–1908) (Koliopoulos, 2008, pp. 92, 93, 94; Vakalopoulos, 1999, p. 342)¹¹, the Second Balkan War (16 June–21 July 1913)¹² (Carnegie, 1914, p. 316), World War I (1916–1918) (Mourélos, 2005; Wakefield, 2017; Hassiotis, 2005; Villari, 1922) and II (1941 and 1944)¹³ (Vakalopoulos, 1996) and in the meantime, the disaster in Asia Minor, followed by a massive refugee flow (Liakos, 2011).

There was no conflict in the Sechovo region during the First Balkan War (1912–1913). The whole area for several months was under the possession of the 10th Division of the Greek Army headed by Colonel Leonidas Paraskevopoulos. On June 18, 1913, however, a Bulgarian military body forcibly occupied Sechovo and the railway station area. The next day the artillery of the 10th Division bombed the village and then executed clearing operations. This was the beginning of the Second Balkan War (Gardika-Katsiadaki, 1998, pp. 372–373).

Regarding the demographic identity of Idomeni, the destruction and abandonment of Idomeni village following the suppression of the rebellion of its inhabitants, in 1821, led to the shrinking of the local Greek population and the start of the establishment of Bulgarian agricultural workers in the landfills. At the beginning of the 20th century, the population of Sechovo was mixed (Greeks orthodox, Bulgarians Catholics etc) (Vakalopoulos, 1999, p. 241)¹⁴. The signing, initially, of the Greek-Serbian Treaty (on 1 June 1913), following the end of the Second Balkan War, marks the liberation of the place.

The use of the case study area (close to the archaeological site) as a theater of military operations during the First World War, being part of the broader landscape of the Macedonian Front (Villari, 1922; Mourélos, 2005; Wakefield, 2017), is evident from surface material as well as the finds (lead and iron bullets¹⁵, artillery shells, either whole or in fragments) from excavations and geophysical prospection (see Table 1, figs. 16a–b).

Table 1. Results of the X-ray analysis of the metal objects from the excavation at Idomeni.

α/α	Ti	Fe	Hf	Re	Pb	Cu	Ag	Cr	Mn	Co
1	0.99	5,41	3,58	1,88	88,1	-	-	-	-	-
2	0.80	3,22	2,03	93,5	0,17	0,35	-	-	-	-
3	0.84	17,7	1,07	1,83	78,8	-	0,29	-	-	-
4	0,51	98,3	-	-	-	-	-	0,28	0,10	0,84
5	0,69	98,6	-	-	-	-	0,1	0,29	0,32	-

In the spring of 1916, the Allied Forces decided to leave the entrenched camp of Thessaloniki and attack towards the north. British and French forces managed to reach the border line, and, along with the Serbian army, they occupied the mountain of Kaimakalan and Monastir.

On the 4th and 17th of March 1916, Bulgarian and German military forces fired at the village of Idomeni and then occupied and fortified the broader area (together with the villages of Hamilo and Dogani) transforming it as a line of fire while the French occupied, instead, the villages Plagia, Fanos and Pyli. During the following spring (1917), the Allies attempted a new attack to improve their positions or even break the front, particularly at the center of the Alliance, that is, between Doiran and Skra.

10 The Greek inhabitants of the wider region (Stromnitsa, Gevgel, Doirani and Meleniko) were asking for weapons from the Greek consulate in Thessaloniki and formed armed resistance kernels.

11 The Sechovite's contribution in the Macedonian Struggle (1904–1908) was very important.

12 Idomeni and other neighboring villages, such as Slop and Muin, were completely burned and destroyed during the fighting by the Greek army and consequently removed and re-established in other locations.

13 On May 29, 1944, divisions of the Greek People's Liberation Army (EL.A.S.) blow up the railway line and hit the Germans at Kotza Dere between Axioupoli and Idomeni Kilkis, with significant losses of soldiers (Karamalakis, 1985).

14 According to the official Ottoman census of the population of Macedonia conducted in 1904, there were 85 Orthodox Greeks living in Sechovo, 486 schismatic Bulgarians, 45 Serbians and 95 Bulgarian Catholics. In 1910 there were 811 Christian Macedonians (85 patriarchs, 586 members of the Exarchate, 45 Slav speakers and 95 Uniates).

15 Report of the X-ray analysis of the metal objects from the excavation at Idomeni by Dr Svetlana Vivdenko (Chemist working at the Ephorate of Antiquities of Thessaloniki region, Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports).

Figure 16. Military finds from the excavation (right) and the geophysical vey (left): lead and iron bullets and artillery shells (archive of the Ephorate of Antiquities at Kilis).

Two natural heights, the Dogani hill, near the archaeological site of this case study, three km south of Sechovo (Idomeni) and 1,200m north of the Slop village and Raviné height, on the western side of the Axios river, northwest of the village Hamilo (Altsak) and north of the village Hatzi-Bari Mahala (Pente Vrises), became a special focus of military activity in the region during the First World War constituting prolonged fortified positions of the Bulgarian and German powers and supporting a defensive line from Strymon River, Lake Doirani, and, following the current border line, to Florina and Prespa.

In particular, the Ravine Hill, named *Chemin de Fer* by the French, was fortified by the Bulgarian army with trenches, observation posts and infantry and artillery defense lines (Leukoporidis, 1965, pp. 206–209). On the 22nd of April (Julian calendar)/5th of May 1917 (Gregorian calendar) the first Regiment of the Serres Division, after a successful attack against the Bulgarian Army with the support of the artillery of the 8th French brigade, achieved to capture the hill. The Bulgarians instead, reacted by conducting two attacks in the next few days without achieving their objective to reoccupy the hill.

Until then, the specific space between the archaeological site and the hill was a kind of no-man's land. A remarkable marker of remembering (Post, 2016) this specific historical past of the landscape is the renaming of the village of Slop in Dogani to honor Greek officer (lieutenant) Efsthios Doganis, head of a squadron of the Serres Division, who fell dead during the battles on the hill (Genikon Epiteleion Stratou / Dieuthinsis Istorias Stratou, 1958, p. 234) (see figs. 17, 18).

Regarding the Idomeni area, in the same year, the Allied Forces initially expelled the Bulgarian forces from the positions they held in the settlements of Idomeni, Slop (Doganis), and Kara Sinaci in the next few days but did not break the Bulgarian defense line. The front remained stable until the end of the war operations in 1918.

The signing of the Treaty of Neuilly¹⁶ a few years later (27th of November 1919), following the end of the First World War, marks the integration of Sechovo into a specific community¹⁷, together with the settlements of Dogani (Slop) and Hamilo (Altsak). Families of refugees (Valsamidis, 2000) from Eastern Thrace were integrated inside the community of Idomeni by the Greek authorities. After the disastrous Greek expeditionary operation in 1922, further refugee flow from eastern Thrace and the coasts of Asia Minor arrived at Idomeni.

¹⁶ The treaty was signed on 27 November 1919 in the town of Neuilly sur Seine between the victorious forces of the First World War and Bulgaria. Bulgaria resigned from all its sovereign rights to western Thrace, while the foreign minorities living in Bulgaria, among them Greeks, were hereafter under protection.

¹⁷ According to the Official Government Gazette [FEK] [issue] A 80 10-4-1919 the Community of Sechovo initially included: Sechovo, Slopnitsa, Alcak and hereinafter includes Idomeni, Dogani and Hamilo.

Figure 17. The archaeological site at Idomeni and the Dogani hill (Chemin de Fer) (archive of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Kilkis, photo Stamatis Chatzitoulousis).

Figure 18. The battle on Ravine height, the “battle-scape” near Idomeni in 1917 and the contribution of Greek army in the Macedonian Front (based on fig. 24 from: GES/DIS (1961). Η συμμετοχή της Ελλάδος εις τον Πόλεμον 1918. Athens (WGS 1984, WebMercator Auxiliary Sphere).

Finally, in 1924, following the exchange of populations, the above Muslim settlements were abandoned and leveled to redevelop lands for subsequent agricultural use. Sechovo was renamed to Idomeni in 1926 as part of the “redefinition” of the identity of historical areas¹⁸.

5 Narrative 4: The Refugee Trauma

One more instance belonging to the life-cycle of the landscape around Idomeni concerns the very recent transformation of the social space on the Greek – North Macedonian border, into an informal transit “residential” camp for refugees and migrants (Nguyen, Ferra, Radjoevic, 2017; Anastasiadou et. al., 2017; Stamnas et. al., 2018). This episode shows how the landscape can become a crucial material agent in the process of border crossing. The camp was spontaneously established at Idomeni in 2014, following the unprecedented adversity caused by the implementation of a closed border policy by the “Balkan Corridor” (Kogovšek Šalamon, 2016) countries, when people of different nations (mainly Syrians and Iraqis but also Afghans, Iranians, Moroccans, Algerians, Tunisians, Pakistans and other war or armed conflict affected countries of the Middle East (Mezarli, 2016), having been forced to flee their homelands, begun to flock to Idomeni, to cross the border northwards and further proceed to Central and Northern Europe (Germany, Sweden etc.).

The peak number of people, living mostly in temporary shelter facilities, such as tents lying on mud-soaked land or alternative structures, such as cabins or railway wagons, under adverse conditions (Rubio & Manzanero, 2017), numbered more than 15,000¹⁹. This bottle-neck camp was forcefully evacuated by Greek authorities in May 2016 to relocate refugees to official processing facilities mostly in and around Thessaloniki (Pelliccia, 2018) (see fig. 19).

Figure 19. Buses carrying refugees depart from the refugee camp at Idomeni after its evacuation (photo Stamatīs Chatzitoulousis).

¹⁸ According to the Official Government Gazette [FEK] [issue] A 401/1926: The Community of Sechovo was renamed to Idomeni Community, while the Alcak at Hamilo and the Sloznica settlement were renamed to Dogani.

¹⁹ “Greece moves thousands of migrants from Idomeni camp”. BBC News (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36358891>).

Considering the issue of the material visibility imprinted on Idomeni's terrain following the camps' evacuation and dismantling by the authorities, we can argue that the material remains related to that specific "social action" and use of the landscape are effectively null. The material 'evidence' of remnants left behind is extremely flimsy; these include ephemeral traces of soil degradation in the agricultural plots due to their overexploitation by the temporary settlers or scattered, lost or forgotten objects of daily use, clothes or children's toys, as material and affective agents of that specific social process (Hamilakis, 2016), part of which was subsequently transformed to the subject of a commemorative art exhibition²⁰. In other words, we might be dealing with a case of a landscape's historic "layer" lying between immaterial memories and forgetfulness (see fig. 20, 21²¹).

Figure 20. Children toys left at the makeshift refugee camp of Idomeni (photos George Katsagelos).

Figure 21. "Relics to Eternity in Idomeni 2015–2016", A multimedia installation by George Katsagelos held at the Greek State Museum of Contemporary Art, Moni Lazariston, Thessaloniki (photo George Katsagelos).

²⁰ "Relics to Eternity in Idomeni 2015-2016", exhibition by G. Katsagelos at the State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki.

²¹ Sincere thanks are owed to Professor George Katsaggelos (Department of Visual Arts and Applied Arts, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) who granted me permission to use his photos.

In all, the sociopolitical collective trauma (George, 2010) of forced displacement is historically documented time and again over the recent past within the wider landscape of Idomeni. Apart from the recent crisis, the oppressive immigration during the first quarter of the twentieth century, of populations, from Eastern Thrace, during the Balkan Wars and World War I²² (Hassiotis, 2005) or from Asia Minor, following the failed expeditionary operation in Anatolia which caused disastrous effects on the local Greek population, and furthermore, the mass flow of migrants who left their homelands voluntarily for economic reasons towards Central Europe in the 1960s.

The traumatic sensorial experience (Andersson, 2014, pp. 153–154) of violent movement through diverse landscapes and spaces embodied in those several demographic groups, moved en masse to the broader Idomeni region from their homeland, was in turn embedded into a new specific social identity, that of the fugitive or migrant, which was unavoidably inscribed in the recent profile of Idomeni's landscape.

Especially regarding Idomeni, this kinaesthetic border crossing experience of the repeated flow and mobility of people and ideas, seen as an “accumulation of bodily knowledge” (Hamilakis, 2016, p. 128), is furthermore meaningfully entangled with a very typical landmark of Idomeni's built social space, that is its border railway station, the only one gateway of exit from Greece to Europe, operating since 1924.

6 Concluding Remarks

The foregoing discussion attempted a diagrammatic reconstitution of Idomeni's cultural landscape, with an emphasis on its constant transformation into places of differing social identities (Knapp & Ashmore, 1999, p. 15) in various historical contexts.

The landscape, as we have seen, involves the entanglement of the living anthropogenic space with the particularly dynamic elements of the wider natural environment, such as the Axios River, the low relief with the hills, the natural passages etc. Axios River, in particular, as a prominent physiographic element constituting the main natural road connecting the Aegean with the Danube to the Pannonian Plain in the north, through its valley (Grbić, 1954, pp. 99–100; Sanev, 1994, p. 26), bears catalytic significance for the continuous feedback of the meaningfulness that the conception of the landscape conveys (Bradley, 1991; Bender, 1993; Tilley, 1994).

The Neolithic is clearly disjoined from later periods, and we do not know the connection between the Byzantine and Ottoman. The only clear reuse of the area, with any kind of reference to the past landscape, is the refugee situation from the Balkan Wars until today.

The Axios River, as a crossroad of the main communication routes from north to south and from west to east (Mitrevski, 2003, p. 13), and especially the traffic and delivery route that follows until its discharge into the Thermaic Gulf, constitutes, from antiquity to the present, a dynamic resource-rich source with an influential impact on the choice of habitation places, a passage between mountain ranges and hills, which were small areas of residential or military activity, as well as the movement of several population groups (military, commercial, immigrants, refugees, etc.).

Returning to the current research in this particular archaeological site, we shall stress that its significance lies in the fact that the site incorporates in its formations a rich, although fragmentary, information stock of various cultural deposits, still very promising for any future research, either excavation or geophysical, and even that of military archaeology as well.

These deposits highlight moments in the diachronic and multifarious anthropogenic activity, at least, as multidisciplinary research has identified, in different historical periods: the Late Neolithic, the Middle Byzantine, the beginning of the 20th century and the very recent past. For these periods, the documentation is, of course, limited from an excavation point of view. A common characteristic, however, of the above

²² The General Allied Headquarters decided the displacement of the refugees of the broader Evzonoi area in March 1916, according to official documents and requests of the refugees to the General Administration of Macedonia. Their homes were demolished to convert to camps and fortifications by the French-Italian troops. After the end of World War I, the dislocated inhabitants of the communities sought compensation from the Greek government (Historical Archive of Macedonia – General Administration of Macedonia, envelope 94).

anthropogenic activity in the same landscape is the very low visibility and legibility of its material imprint.

The inconspicuous and diverse ruins detected in the landscape of Idomeni, from the neolithic pits and the Middle Byzantine burials to the accumulations of (burned) clay features, the part of the shell and the lead and iron bullets or even the memorial on the top of Ravine Hill (Vlasidis, 2016, p. 102) and the remains of children's toys from the recent refugee camp (Hodolidou, 2018), constitute the crossing point of the visible and invisible, of presence and absence, of continuity and discontinuity, of the alienation from the past (Coser, 1992, pp. 40–41, 46–51) and familiarization (Bender, 2006, p. 306) with it, of memory (Lane, 2005) and forgetfulness.

They thus contribute to the understanding of the present social space and time, the reinforcement and feedback of numerous “collective memory communities” (Yoffee, 2007, p. 3) with different inscribed commemorative practices (Alcock, 2002, p. 43) and, consequently, to the shaping of the multicultural cultural identity of the wider landscape.

To sum up, Idomeni's landscape can be approached as a palimpsest of symbols (Terkenli, 2001), “the reading of which allowed one to decipher the scribbled signatures of earlier activities”, as Barbara Bender (Bender, 2006, p. 304) notes, or “a document on which messages have been written and rewritten”, since multiple records of embodied human experience (Feld & Basso, 1996; Van Dyke, 2010), such as housing choices, ritual practices, socio-economic determinants, war operations, and successive destructions or associations, changes in demographic and cultural composition, timeless migratory flows, leave their more or less distinct (material or even immaterial) imprint in this.

All these experiences, their memories constituting eclectic, selective reconstructions (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 210) or forgetfulness, the low visualization of the archaeological and historical landscape, and even more, its partial destruction and consequent disappearance due to the modern road works, have and continue to provide a kind of a sacred identity to the landscape of Idomeni.

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