

MONEMVASIA

REVISITED

A long-forgotten island city still has many lessons to teach...

by Norbert Schoenauer

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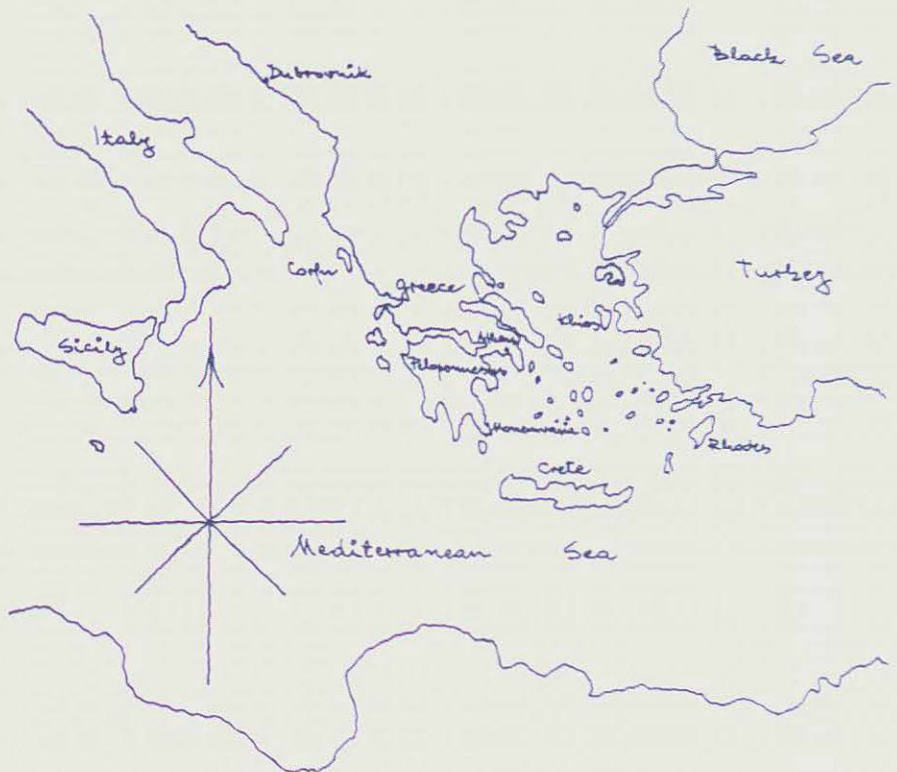
Introduction

A COLOSSAL ROCK ISLAND jutting out into the sea along the eastern coast of the Peloponnese provided the insular setting of medieval Monemvasia. During the Middle Ages, a large invincible fortress town occupied the plateau on top of the rock, and a flourishing commercial port lay at its base. Today, the upper city is in ruins and the lower town is nearly deserted except in the summer months, when a few Athenians and a sprinkle of Swiss and other foreign families return faithfully, year after year, to their summer residences in the walled lower town. Some transient tourists also visit Monemvasia and scramble up the steep rock incline to the upper city in search of the shadowy traces of a once flourishing city. But during the winter months, Monemvasia hibernates.

In the summer of 1905, Ramsay Traquair, the third director of the School of Architecture of McGill University, visited Monemvasia. As a scholar of the British School of Archaeology at Athens, Traquair made measurements of several Byzantine churches of the city and published his work in the annual of that institution.

Seventy-five years later, reaching Monemvasia with considerably less difficulty, the author of this monograph, accompanied by two recent McGill graduates, Athena Kovatsi and Dimitrios Batsos, stumbled upon this enchanting medieval town, but was unaware at the time that he was following in the footsteps of Traquair.

Although still relatively unknown to many students of architecture and urban planning, Monemvasia's history



nevertheless offers an insight into Greek medieval town planning, a chapter in the study of planning often neglected in favour of the medieval town design practiced in Italy and Western Europe. Since Monemvasia's decline prevented its despoilation by nineteenth-century urban accretion, this city allows us today a unique opportunity to look into its medieval setting and to analyse the structure of a Byzantine city. An attempt is made here to describe briefly the history of the town and then to portray the character of its urban environment.

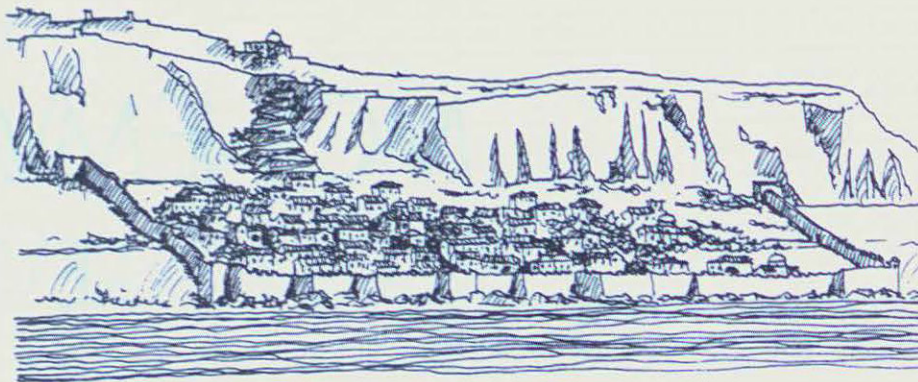
Epidauros Limera

During the Classical Age and preceding the establishment of Monemvasia, Epidauros Limera, a

Hellenic city situated on the mainland just north of the rock island and along a sheltered bay, was the ancient urban centre of this region. The town was built on and about a rocky hill a few hundred yards from the protected bay, a bay used throughout history for the temporary anchorage of ships sailing to and from Cape Malea.

Epidauros Limera was a port city reputed to have been the colonial foundation of the citizens of Argive Epidauros. The colonial city was established on an ancient Mycenaean site as evidenced by the excavation of numerous chamber tombs, some with typical stepped dromoi.

The town site was irregular in form and was enclosed on all sides by



Monemvasia - lower town

fortification walls interspersed by frequent buttress-like towers. The acropolis was built on the two hilltops of the site and was an inner fortress accessible only from the town. Three temples were constructed on the acropolis: to Athena, Aphrodite, and Asklepios, the last being the Greek god of medicine and healing. A fourth temple was located near the port and was designated for the worship of Zeus Soter, the protector of the harbour.

It was during the Dark Ages, in the fourth and fifth centuries, when first the Visigoths, then the Avars and Slavs inundated Greece, that the city fell victim to barbarian incursions and total devastation which led eventually to its abandonment by the citizens. Traces of the fortification walls are still identifiable in the cultivated fields now occupying the town site. That few ruins of temples and buildings survived is understandable; after the destruction of Epidauros, the town site served as a convenient stone quarry used for the construction of subsequent urban settlements.

The refugees of Epidauros Limera appear to have established a small settlement in the mountains north of their former town site, a place that is still locally known as Palaea Monemvasia. However, this small settlement did not endure for long; not offering enough protection, this site was soon abandoned in favour of the more secure southern location of the rock island of Monemvasia. Here they laid the cornerstone of a more permanent fortress settlement that has now survived for over a millenium.

Monemvasia's History

The rock island of Monemvasia has been identified with the Minoa Akra referred to by ancient writers and was located some twenty miles north of Cape Malea on the eastern coast of the Peloponnese. The island was connected to the mainland by a

narrow sand bar later replaced by a long stone causeway and a bridge with thirteen arches near the middle. This single access point to the island gave the city its name; 'Monemvasia' is derived from the Greek *mone emvasis*, which roughly translated is 'single entrance'.

This island of precipitous cliffs arising out of the sea is about one mile long and has a high, oval-shaped plateau at its peak, about six hundred feet above sea level; this plateau became the town site of the upper fortress city or citadel. On the southern side of the island the cliffs recede slightly in a crescent form and rock debris at the base of the cliffs created a relatively wide inclined plain at the island's base. This inclined plain offered a logical means of access to the upper city and also provided an opportunity for the development of the Faubourg-like lower town. The strategic location of the island and its high cliffs were, no doubt, the reasons why Monemvasia was frequently referred to as the 'Gibraltar of Greece'.

Monemvasia was probably established towards the end of the sixth century and during its first century of existence was probably an insignificant settlement. By 746, however, Monemvasia was already hailed as being the most important city on the coast of the Peloponnese. No doubt, this rapid growth to a position of significance is attributable to several factors. First, the city's cliffs and fortifications were virtually unassailable during the Middle Ages. Second, the proximity of two large bays, one north and the other south of the island rock, as well as the strategic location of the island along the maritime route to the Levant, made the city a favoured reshipment centre; in fact, all maritime traffic of both commercial or naval fleets "from the West to Constantinople or Asia Minor had to pass between Crete and Cape Malea on the southern end

of the Peloponnese, and thus past Monemvasia."¹ Third, the inhabitants of Monemvasia were skilled seamen and merchants who through trade amassed great fortunes, some of which they lavished upon their city. Fourth, Monemvasia's fame was also enhanced by a local wine produced in the region and exported to many countries; this wine, favoured in many medieval courts of Europe, was called 'Malmsey', a corruption of the word Monemvasia. Finally, Monemvasia was made the seat of a Greek bishopric and thereby inevitably a Byzantine religious centre of medieval Greece.

The eighth century also brought some misfortune to the city. In 747 the plague ravished Monemvasia. After it subsided, Albanian and Slavic settlers were encouraged by the crown to occupy the devastated agricultural areas of the Peloponnese. The economy of the region soon recovered and the wealth of the Monemvasian citizen multiplied to such an extent that it attracted the attention of Saracen pirates who regularly pillaged the southern coastal cities of the Mediterranean basin. However, in spite of several attempts to pillage and to subjugate Monemvasia, as they did Sicilian and Cretan cities, their efforts always failed. The city's fortifications and its cliffs, defended by the heroic Monemvasiotes, proved to be invincible.

In the eleventh century the Normans captured Sicily from the Arabs, and during the following century they also attempted to expand their domain to the East. In fact, in 1147 a Norman fleet appeared before Monemvasia with the intent to subjugate its citizenry, but meeting a fierce resistance, their attack ended in defeat. Thus, during the following year Monemvasia was spared the fate of massive destruction that Roger II inflicted upon other areas of Greece.

The Byzantine Empire was reduced by the outcome of the Fourth Crusade to



MONEMVASIA
plan of the lower town
after Klam and Steinmüller

only five fragments still ruled by the Greeks; the two Despotates of Rhodes and Epirus, the two Empires of Nicaea and Trebizond, and the isolated fortress city of Monemvasia. Of course, Monemvasia's strategic position as a free outpost of Byzantine interests was a constant source of annoyance to both the Franks and the Venetians. Hence, in 1245 Prince Guillaume de Villeharduin prepared to siege the 'Greek Gibraltar' with the aid of the Venetians, by sea and land.

For three long years the garrison (of Monemvasia) held out, 'like a nightingale in its cage', as the Chronicler quaintly says...till all supplies were exhausted, and they had eaten the very cats and mice. Even then, however, they only surrendered on condition that they should be excused from all feudal services, except at sea, and should even in that case be paid.²

The Frankish dominion in Monemvasia lasted only for about fourteen years and came to an end with the reconquest of Constantinople, Guillaume's defeat by the Byzantine Emperor, and the total collapse of the 'Latin Empire'.

Two centuries of prosperity followed the expulsion of the Franks. Being the chief seaport of the new Despotate of Morea, Monemvasia became the seat of an Orthodox metropolitan, and its citizens were granted many privileges, one of which was tax-free access to markets of the Byzantine Empire. With such advantages the island rock city experienced its Golden Age (1263-1460) and this city of mercantile fame also acquired the status of a centre of learning. Less auspicious was the fact that several great local families partook in sea piracy and "under the shadow of the Greek flag, Monemvasia became, too, one of the most dangerous lairs of corsairs in the

Levant."³

During the fifteenth century, Monemvasiotes had to face the threat of being engulfed by the Turkish Sultanate. At the time, the only formidable power of resisting the expansion of the Ottoman Empire was seated in Venice. Accordingly, the Monemvasiotes admitted a Venetian garrison to their citadel and, in 1464, the Senate of the city adopted the necessary formal provisions to declare Monemvasia's colonial dependency on Venice.

Under Venetian rule, the city (now called **Napoli di Malvasia**) prospered until the beginning of the sixteenth century. However, with the recurrence of the Turco-Venetian War and the loss of large mainland territories of Morea, of both agricultural and viticultural importance, the glory of Monemvasia gradually waned. Finally, at a peace treaty, Venice surrendered its last possessions on Morea and delivered invincible Monemvasia, without bloodshed, to Turkish rule.

Tolerant in religious matters and relatively lenient in taxation, the Ottoman rule of one and a half centuries (1540-1690) restored prosperity to Monemvasia with the exception that the 'Malmsey' wine was no longer produced, since the vineyards of the mainland were no longer cultivated by the Islamic Turks. Monemvasia was renamed by the Ottomans to **Meneksche**, a poetic name equivalent to 'violet city' and apparently derived from the colour of its cliffs at sundown as well as reminiscent of the abundant cyclamen flowering in late summer on the island.

During the seventeenth century the Venetians and their allies made at least four unsuccessful attempts to regain control over Monemvasia, which now became a "chief point of embarkation for the Turkish forces."⁴

Finally, in June of 1690, yielding perhaps more to the besiegers' elaborate measures of isolation rather than their assault, Monemvasia once again came under Venetian domination.

The second Venetian rule lasted twenty-five years and although the merchants were once again able to engage in trade with the West and the viticulture of the mainland revived, several restrictions imposed by the Venetians, including an unfavorable monetary exchange policy, prevented its merchants from prospering as they had done during Monemvasia's Golden Age.

Venetian rule was superseded by a second period of Turkish rule (1715-1821), when the Venetian **Podesta**, the chief magistrate of the municipality, surrendered the fortress city to the Turks in return for a large monetary payment. The Turkish occupation of Morea and Monemvasia accelerated the decline, already in progress, of this region. With a considerable decrease in population, the land on the mainland was largely untilled and viticulture again ceased, while trade, the lifeline of Monemvasia, declined into insignificance.

However, the first year of the Greek War of Independence saw the liberation of Monemvasia. After a siege of four months, the Turkish garrison surrendered and the city hosted the first assembly of free Greece. Several Monemvasiote families who had fled the city on previous occasions returned to the rock island and were joined by some new settlers. However, most of the old families were no longer involved in trade, but lived off their extensive land holdings tilled by dependant peasants. No doubt, a contributing factor to the city's decline as a trade centre must also have been the general deterioration of trade between Europe and the Near East in favour of that with the Americas.



Monemvasia's main portal

The liberation of Greece from Ottoman rule could not stem the further decline of the once proud and invincible city of Monemvasia. In fact, with advances in weaponry, the fortress city was no longer invincible as it rightly claimed to have been during the Middle Ages, and its insular setting and the relative inaccessibility now hindered rather than enhanced commercial development. But, this small and historic medieval community, with its quaint narrow streets and numerous Byzantine churches, still comes alive every summer and enchants its visitors with its past glory.

Urban Design in Monemvasia

As in its medieval past, fortification walls still embrace the lower town of Monemvasia on three sides, but on its

fourth side, the northern side, the steep cliffs of the island's citadel made the construction of defense installations superfluous.

The western parapet wall has a length of about two hundred metres and stretches from a projecting bastion at the seaward point towards the main city gate, situated roughly at midpoint, and thence "the wall runs up the slope of the cliff where a tower flanks the whole length, with, above it, a little bastion built on to the rock and commanding a perfect view of the whole wall."⁵ Traquair identified the western walls as good examples of sixteenth century Venetian fortification design. The masonry around the gate "is of the typical fine Venetian work, ornamented with a large bead molding. Above the gate are the remains of a little corbelled turret."⁶ The old

heavy plank door wings of the gate sheeted in iron and fastened with large forged nails are still there, but in contrast to the time when Traquair visited the town, they are no longer shut every night. The gate opening leading to the town is a semi-circular arch which leads through a dark, barrel-vaulted passage blocked by a thick masonry screen wall, or 'spirit wall'; at this point, however, a right-angle turn leads into another dark, vaulted passage which opens into the main street of the city. The stone benches lining the walls of the narrow passage and the screen wall, originally blocking the entrance for defense purposes, make access so tortuous that neither carts nor automobiles can enter the city.

A second gate is located in the upper bastion of the western wall; this gate provides a more convenient access to the serpentine path leading to the gates of the upper fortress city.

The eastern fortification wall, although much shorter, is similar in arrangement to the western one; but, in the absence of a main road leading to it, the wall is penetrated only by a single small door affording the passage to the small unbuilt area beyond the city walls.

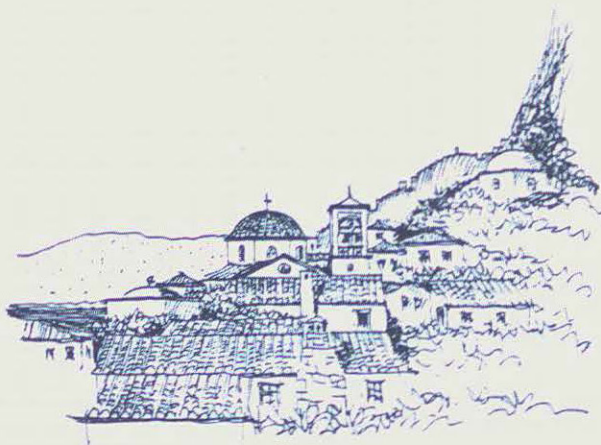
A flanking tower and small bastion, similar to those on the west side, protect the northern extremity of the wall, while "a little stone sentry-box, again with a stone dome, a not uncommon feature in Venetian work,"⁷ still guards the seaward end.

The south side of the town is fortified by a long parapet wall with typical crenellations and follows the uneven edge of the rocky coastline. A vaulted narrow gateway near its midpoint, called a *portello*, is the only aperture that allows an exit towards the sea.

The spine street of Monemvasia runs from the main city gate in the west to the rear exit door in the east, a



South side of Monemvasia with 'portello' gateway



Christos Elkomenos and the campanile

distance of about five hundred metres, and since it closely follows a contour line, it is basically level. Near the centre of the town, this narrow cobblestone street flanks tangentially the northern edge of the main town square, the **Plateia Dsami**; the square, being at a slightly lower elevation, is reached by a few descending marble steps that run parallel with the main street.

This main street, between the city gate and the town square, is lined by old, two-storey stone buildings with barrel-vaulted ground floor spaces for shops, workshops, and restaurants, while the upper quarters are used for living accommodation. In places, the street also serves as an outdoor extension of restaurants, where tables are shaded by vines crawling over pergolas bridging the street.

In contrast to the commercial character of the first segment of the spine street, its eastern section, the section beyond the town square, is residential and appears more spacious because several buildings are detached with only garden walls flanking them relieving the tunnel effect of the narrow street.

As is so typical in most Greek cities, the town square, or **platéia**, is the focal point of Monemvasia and has, accordingly, a central location. On the east side the square is flanked by the west facade of the largest church, **Christos Elkomenos**, or 'Christ in Bonds', as well as, along side it, by the episcopal residence, a former monastery, which is built adjoining the church and bridges an arched descending passageway leading to the south-easterly residential district of the town. The north side of the square is dominated by an Italianate **campanile**, or bell tower, and beyond it, by the facades of main street houses with the cliffs of the citadel serving as a further backdrop. On the west side, the **platéia** is defined by a corner building and, more importantly,

by a former sixteenth-century church, **Hagios Petros**, which the Turks converted into a **jami'** mosque; this mosque, a large domed building, was used as a coffee house at the time when Traquair visited Monemvasia, but today the structure is unused, but will eventually become a museum. Finally, the south side of the square is only defined by a low, but wide, parapet wall and bench, thereby affording a view from the square over the rooftops of buildings at its base and an unimpeded and far-reaching view over the sea with the outline of Cape Malea on the horizon.

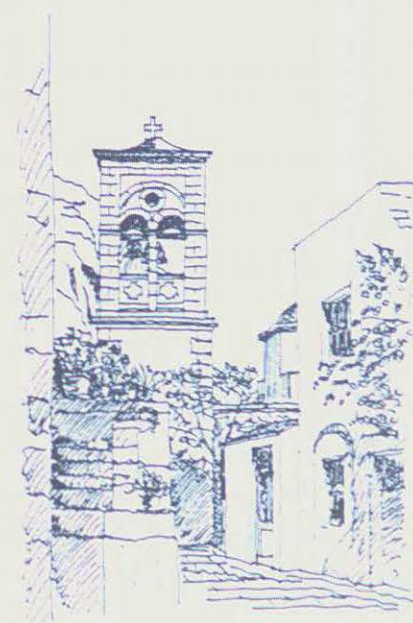
Several gnarled trees with whitewashed trunks and spreading leafy crowns shade the centre of the square, while a few oleanders provide vivid splashes of colour here and there. The north-western corner of the square is used by a nearby restaurant as a starlit dining terrace in the evenings, a scenario that only vaguely recalls the nightlife of the **plateia** when Monemvasia saw busier days.

The secondary street pattern of the city is typically early medieval and consists of a maze of narrow alleys, small squares and cul-de-sacs. Alleys running perpendicular to the contours are invariably so steep that steps had to be cut to negotiate the level differences. The numerous blind alleys and especially the vaulted passages below dwellings bridging the public street in fact suggest an oriental influence in town design and offered the advantages of efficient use of urban space, the provision of welcomed shade in a hot and arid climate, and stability in the two facing buildings which were shored by the bridging of the superstructure.

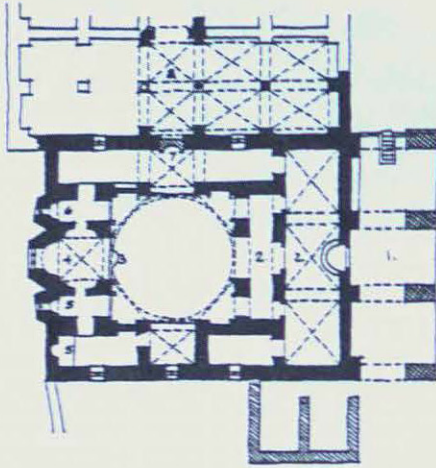
Comparing the area devoted to the public right-of-ways of contemporary urban development in the West with

that of medieval Monemvasia, one cannot but be impressed with the latter's efficiency. There is no wasted space, nor is there a no-man's-land. This, of course, means that every nook and corner of the town is cared for.

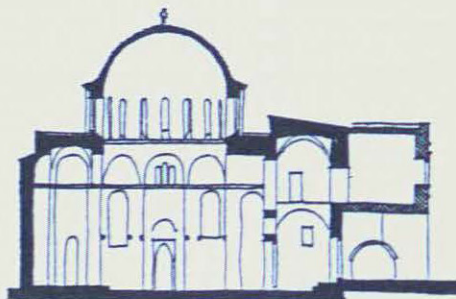
All of these characteristics result in an urban environment that is truly human in scale, and the visual aspects of its streetscapes present a happy balance between uniformity and diversity; a deep-rooted sense of tradition in the use of specific building materials and colours, and a timeless way of dwelling design, provide uniformity, while changing topographic site conditions, households of varied sizes and affluence, and the occasional inoffensive whimsy in an individual building are the ingredients that bring about diversity. Since the



- | | |
|----------------|---------------|
| 1: portico | 5: prothesis |
| 2: narthex | 6: diaconicon |
| 3: iconostasis | 7: mihrab |
| 4: bema | 8: cloister |



plan of Hagia Sophia
after Ramsay Traquair



section of Hagia Sophia
after Ramsay Traquair

man-made environment is like a mirror reflecting social values of its builders, this visual balance also implies a harmony between collectivity and individuality; in other words, neither distorted collective or individual, nor mutual or selfish interests are allowed to dictate the physical appearance of the urban environment.

The urban environment of Monemvasia never ceases to surprise the onlooker. Little features are meant to reveal themselves only as rewards for those who look for them, which brings one to another conclusion; that Monemvasia's aesthetic stimulus is both plain and rich; plain for the fleeting and rich for the contemplative visitor.

It is too easy to dismiss these urban design characteristics as belonging to another time. Urban wastelands, carelessness in urban land use efficiency, departure from the human scale, as well as indifference to the quality of design may be only temporary hallmarks of a relatively small extravagant society. Eventually a re-evaluation of our architectural, planning and urban design practices will be imposed upon us, at which time, it will be all too evident that we have ignored or lost the human dimension.

Building Design in Monemvasia

Many old houses have survived in Monemvasia; some have been restored

within the last decade, but most are still ruins in various stages of disrepair. When Traquair strolled through the city, he found the old houses to be full of picturesque details, and so they were. Buildings are generally of stone masonry construction, and the roofs, whether saddleback, hipped, or domed, are covered with old-fashioned clay tiles. The rainwater is invariably collected off the roofs and stored in cisterns, some of which are quite elaborate in design and have a settling tank. Many houses have arched, stone loggias on the upper floors, usually with a southern orientation and thereby also a view over the sea. These vaulted loggias on the upper floors are also common to southern Italy and the North African coast; indeed, they are very reminiscent of the *liwanat* of moslem houses.

Because of the ever present and brilliant sunshine in Monemvasia, windows are relatively small and sometimes the stone lintels are cut in the form of an arched ogee which is characteristically Venetian in design.

Traquair observed that "chimneys project from the houses in a segmental bow carried on corbels, and terminate in circular shafts with pierced cotes at the top."⁸ These chimneys also betray a Venetian influence and must have been more numerous at the turn of the century than they are today. Moreover, some elaborate architectural features used to adorn the houses are of a humble interpretation of the Renaissance style, as Traquair observed, "not unpleasant in small pieces."⁹

More than a score of Monemvasia's Byzantine churches and chapels have survived, if not in their entirety then at least in part.

The largest church, fronting on the *plateia* of the lower town, has already been mentioned. This church of Christ in Bonds "has a nave arcade on

pointed arches and a central dome, but is much modernised; the central apse has stone seats running round behind the altar, and is probably the only really old part left; at the west end are two stone seats which used to be pointed out as those occupied by the Palaeologus and his empress."¹⁰

Other noteworthy Byzantine churches with a hemispherical dome are those of St. Nicholas and of Our Lady of Crete, both of which date from the Venetian occupation and are of the same type and construction. The church of St. Anna, a small barrel-vaulted church with sidewall arcades, is located near the western wall; this church has an annex on the northern side, which, because of the topography of the site, has a higher floor level; in the absence of an *Eikonostasis*, Traquair suggests that this church may have been used by the Venetians for the Latin rite.

There is little doubt that the most beautiful church in Monemvasia stands amongst the ruins of the upper city; the *Hagia Sophia* is an interesting example of Byzantine architecture dating from the reign of Andronicus II Palaeologus (1287-1328) and was attached to a large cloister on the south side, which unfortunately collapsed during the last decade of the nineteenth century and is now a mass of ruins. Parts of the church probably predate Palaeologus's reign, and other parts have undergone some changes since then; for example, in front of the narthex, a Venetian loggia was added, with three rooms above it, during the Venetian occupation, and later, during the Turkish rule when the upper city became a garrison town, the church was remodelled into a mosque with the *mihrab* blocking the southern door that linked the church with the cloister.

The most awesome space of *Hagia Sophia* is its central area "covered by a large semicircular dome on a drum pierced with sixteen windows; this



Hagia Sophia

drum is carried by pendentures on an octagon formed by squinching the angles of the square."¹¹ The church has three apsidal chapels on the east side, with the central space above the altar vaulted in a cross-groin fashion. The *Hagia Sophia*, also known as the Church of Divine Wisdom, today stands alone among the ruins of the city's former citadel, lonely and precariously near the eastern edge of the plateau's cliffs.

Conclusion

With its venerable medieval history, Monemvasia is a relatively forgotten Greek community. In the distant past, when it was reputed to be the 'Gibraltar of Greece' and known at various times as *Napoli di Malvasia* and *Menksche*, it occupied an enviable position commanding the trade routes of the Levant. This position brought wealth to the community, and to its merchants, great prosperity, all of which in turn made Monemvasia the subject of envy and, hence, a frequent victim of foreign assault. In spite of its reputation of invincibility, it often succumbed and was ruled for extensive periods by both Western and Eastern powers. The liberation of Greece from the Ottoman Empire over a century ago, however, did not result in a great resurgence of the city, a fate shared by most other Greek communities, and its importance declined throughout the last half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. But, the last few

decades have brought some new life to the community because it offered to visitors a unique glimpse of a medieval Byzantine urban environment that is both picturesque and tranquil. Basking in the warm Mediterranean sun and washed by the Aegean sea, Monemvasia is a charming human settlement where time was allowed to stand still for a while, perhaps to allow us to see and to contemplate its values and its heritage. And, at the edge of the upper city's cliffs, *Hagia Sophia* still stands as a sentinel, its precarious position not dissimilar to that allotted by our age of wisdom. □

Notes

1. Rainer W. Klaus and Ulrich Steinmüller, *Monemvasia: The Town and its History*, 1980, p. 8.
2. William Miller, "Monemvasia," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. XXVII, 1907, p. 231.
3. Miller, p. 232.
4. A.J.B. Wace and F.W. Hasluck, "Laconia: Topography II," *Annual of the British School at Athens*, Vol. XIV, 1907-1908, p. 178.
5. Ramsay Traquair, "Laconia: Mediaeval Fortresses," *Annual of the British School at Athens*, Vol. XII, 1905-1906, p. 270.
6. Traquair, p. 270.
7. Traquair, p. 271.
8. Traquair, p. 273.
9. Traquair, p. 273.
10. Traquair, p. 272.
11. Traquair, p. 273.