

Greci today and yesterday

The town

Time seems to have stopped in the historical centre of Greci. Its twisting, narrow alleys scramble up endless slopes. Many of its whitewashed or bare stone houses with finely-worked old portals are decorated with plants and flowers. Objects that to the eye of the passer-by are bound to look exotic hang on the outside walls of some of them.

In summer the town is cheerful-looking and full of people, children play in the streets and the elderly chat outside the doors of their houses. The unsuspecting visitor walking around this town that so perfectly fits into the countryside it is an integral part of cannot but be surprised, astounded, at discovering that these simple alleys quite unexpectedly hold 'other' riches, a special tonality.

In winter the town empties of these people, the streets are populated mainly by the wind, the elderly inhabitants move slowly around in their houses. The town is hushed, but every now and then – though not very often – the silence is broken by those tones seemingly from 'elsewhere which in summer blend with other sounds.

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The dwellings and aristocratic townhouses

On the main thoroughfares in the centre of the town there is one elegant dwelling after another with portals and façades decorated with renaissance and baroque motifs, and sometimes 19th-century restoration work. These two-storey type of dwellings with internal courtyards and façades artistically decorated by skillful Greci stonemasons were the homes of aristocratic families One of them is Palazzo Lusi, which is now where the town hall is located, and Palazzo Caccese, which hosts theatrical events, traditional dancing and historical costume shows.

It is said that the aristocratic families squandered all their fortunes, left Greci and emigrated, therefore suffering the same fate of those who possessed little or nothing and who had no other choice but to depart. This seems to the imagination to relate the people of Greci to the history of the Albanians, a sad dialectic which is both ancient and modern and which, as it were, speaks the same language which has been guarded jealously for so long.

The *Calive* dwellings

To the south of the towns we find the *Calive*, the dwellings of the really poor, those who left the town before anyone else and who, by abandoning an entire quarter which today is totally uninhabited, probably initiated that process of impoverishment of the spirit which has in recent years reached its peak.

Costruite in pietre e col tetto in legno e tegole, le *Calive* erano generalmente formate da un unico ambiente che doveva fungere sia da abitazione che da ricovero per gli animali. Ciò, si racconta, consentiva di combattere il freddo di inverni gelidi in un rapporto osmotico tra uomini e animali che era cifra quasi costante della vita d'allora.

The *Calive*, which are very low-ceilinged, have beaten-earth floors and mostly lean against each other as if for support, are nevertheless still intact, although uninhabited. They are located near Breggo, the hill garden of the people of Greci.

Breggo

If you follow the white *halive* that line the rugged road in a quasi-surreal landscape, you reach the southern side of Greci and in the *Breggo*. This is one of the most picturesque parts of the place, a well-cared-for natural park on a promontory that juts out towards the Cervaro valley.

It is said that, forty years ago when the town was swarming with people in the square, the main streets, the church, the inn, the *Breggo* was thought of as being a suburb and rarely frequented.

Today, however, the people of Greci enjoy the place and talk about its beauty, its profoundly peaceful atmosphere, as if they were as amazed as one who rifles in the bottom of a drawer and finds, among a thousand other forgotten objects, a diamond that, until yesterday, was thought to be a mere piece of glass.

The farms: *Trefontane*

Scattered over the area around the town, the farms are villages in their own right and, taken together, are populated areas. The architectural style is dictated by their use, common throughout highland Irpina, and consists of small nuclei which have been grouped together by families who settled outside the walls of the town. The Trefontane farm is a good example.

It is said that the fortified farm of Trefontane was built on Via Traiana about the middle of the 16th century. It seems that in the internal courtyard there was an inn for the numerous wayfarers that passed through on their way to other parts.

The cluster of houses consisted of calcareous gravel buildings standing on the long sides of a rectangle, while on the short sides there were entrances with an internal stone-paved courtyard and a fountain for both people and cattle. The water came from a spring which served another fountain on Via Traiana.

Public space

It seems that the town was divided into spaces with borders that it was customary to think of, rather than the rule, as marking imaginary demarcations between one area and another. The ‘chiaszzaioli’ (inhabitants of the town centre) rarely impinged on the space of Breggo and the ‘breggaioli’ rarely went as far as the piazza. The women worked and entertained themselves with other women, and the men with men.

At the bottom of this, perhaps, was the idea that everything belonged to its own family, everything belonged to a nucleus and a place and that the harmonious balance of all things was guaranteed by the conservation of and respect for this natural order

The Church

In spite of this, at certain times these spaces became the property of all, meeting places, spaces that were shared.

In church, and in the processions that wormed around the town, people got together on occasions of festivals, feast days such as the Madonna del Caroseno and St Bartholemew's Day, which are still dear to and taken part in by the whole community.

Even today, at Sunday Mass the young men take advantage of a time when everyone can be together to be in contact with the young girls of the village and start the custom of courting them.

This custom meant that the furtive longing glances of summer could be followed by throwing snowballs at each other during the snowy winter, the distance between the snowballers and the force of the throw being an indication of being in love.

The piazza

The piazza at the centre of the town is so small that in some way it is surprising, seeming to reflect an existence in which people too conformed to the same dimensions, the intimate tones of privacy, so that the town was nothing other than a large extended family.

Not far from Palazzo Lusi and Palazzo Caccese, just a few steps from the bar which is still today the centre of the social life of the town, the piazza was where market day attracted outsiders, the so-called *latini* who came to barter for cattle in exchange for their own merchandise.

The inn and the bar

The inn was the men's meeting place. Roasted broad beans, wine and card games as well as the famous 'passatella' (literally, pastime), a game that was against the law because of the quantity of alcohol that had to be drunk; its illegality probably made it all the more enjoyable. These were the things that filled up the evenings and at times the days when there was no work in the fields.

It was at the inn, too, that meetings took place with the *latini* passing through Greci and making the best of the local people's proverbial hospitality.

It was a place where many languages were spoken, and the theatre of many episodes which made linguistic misunderstandings a thing of legend.

Home and fireside

The heart of every home was the hearth, where all the generations came together. In the evening the family got together at the fireside, the children played, danced and listening to their grandparents telling stories of men, things and animals, while the flames of the fire and the flickering lights were given form by the imagination, the mouse in search of a wife, brigands, young maids ...

In the warmth of the light of the fire, images and familiar sounds, relations and friends merged with unfamiliar images and sounds, unusual things belonging to *another* world *beyond*, a world which was not expressed like the *katunciae*, whose sounds could be fixed on paper, in books.

School

School was central to the life of the community. It undoubtedly provided an occasion for socialising with young people of the same age, an opportunity to learn to read and write, but more important than anything else it was the first time of organised, continuous and regular contact with the Italian language. Because, even as recently as 40 or 50 years ago, the majority of the people of *geci* learned their Italian at school. It was at school that they began to become familiar with the language, and before starting school many heard it only occasionally, others – even if it was spoken at home – thought of it as being ‘other’.

The teachers, who were often not from *Greci* itself, did not speak the *katuncia* dialect. Some of them graciously and kindly tolerated the children’s tendency to slip into the dialect of the language that was more familiar to them. Others were more strict, aware of the need to aim at Italianization but uncertain about how to do it, and they punished, sometimes quite severely, the younger *Greci* children who, when then found themselves in difficulty, carelessly slipped back into their family’s dialect.

Managing to attend school was not always an easy matter. Getting to it on days when the snow made the roads and lanes impracticable was sometimes quite a challenge not only for the children, but for the teachers too.

However, these difficulties neither discouraged them nor diminished the awareness that education was a way of achieving freedom. They knew that attending school would enable them to speak and write the language of the majority, and that although this language was not the first one they acquired, nonetheless it was not to be loved any less.

It is therefore no surprise that reaching the goal of the Elementary School diploma was something to be proud of, and this is still the case 60 or 70 years later.