Interpreting the Local Development through the History of the Place: The Example of Nigrita (Visaltia, Greece)

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ABSTRACT

The city of Nigrita is located in Visaltia, the valley of the Strymon, in Eastern Macedonia which in the past was an active shareholder of Greek history. The text tries to explain the current situation through the time. The approach involves both the city of Nigrita -and Visaltia- the region in which it grows, from the time of first appearance until today. The town appears for the first time in the 15th century and quickly evolves into village and then in a strong town. In an area with a significant presence in Classical and Byzantine periods, the city meets the conditions to be established. The determining factor for its establishment is the change of traffic policy during the Ottomanic occupation, which choose the mountain shortcuts instead of the Roman style traffic through lowland axes. Developed ex nihilo, at the area of this node in the old Roman road system, the city of Nigrita serves one of the main intersections in the valley of Serres to Thessaloniki. Since then, the growth of the city is continuous until two decisive events in the early 20th century. The first one, concerns the change in traffic policy of New Greek State, which sets new routes that bypass the city. The second fact is linked with the transformation of Nigrita's geographical situation, decisively altered by the draining of lake Kerkinida, making the city part of a mandatory central corridor in a typical city in an open plain. Since then, the city has a very slow and declining growth, because of certain particularities and also the general situation of the Greek periphery. The text seeks to understand and interpret the present city, through data in-city and regional scale, attempting to study-specified cross sections in the historical geography of the place.

Keywords: Historical geography, Local Development, New Greek State, Nigrita, Vissaltia-Greece

INTRODUCTION

The image of a region reveals to a large extent the main characteristics of the place. These external features, such as architecture and street layout, often do not explain the progression (positive or negative) recorded. One of the roles of Historical Geography is that, by analyzing a place in historical time, to provide answers on today’s human geography.

This study deals with one such example about the town of Nigrita (Visaltia) in Macedonia. Its current figure and living history show a calculable growth in the past. The text
focuses on the town from the moment of the first witness till now, but also on Visaltia, the area in which the town emerged, since we have evidence historically.

Central questions are to investigate the circumstances and the reasons for the town’s foundation together with the causes for its development as a center from a range of older historically and equivalent settlements. What is that make this town to detach from a series of neighboring spatial clusters with the same features, if not more, and important past. At the same time, the role and the importance of the wider region, Visaltia, is examined mainly before the appearance of the town, a region with significant presence in the geopolitical landscape of classical and later Byzantinte period.

Firstly, the text will study the natural background of the area in which human activity is developed, then will try to list the most important historical moments and finally to interpret and analyze the reasons of founding, the fluctuations in the town’s growth and current prospects.

THE NATURAL CONTEXT

Historically, various tribes of Thrake live around river Srymonas. One of those is the Visaltes. Both Stefanos Byantios in 6th century and also Gregoras in 14th century are citing this residence referring to Herodotus and Thoukidides together with Aristotelis and Plato. According to the ancient writers, the ancient Visaltia was covering the area from the Strymon’s confluence river Aggites, to the mountain Vertisko and south to the sea. Visaltia is an region that is surrounded by the northern sides of mountain Vertiskos and Kerdyllio and the southern riparian zone of Strymon. The extend of this area is 760 km². The entire bassin of the river Strymon, the valley, stands at 1.1030 km².

The southern sides of the mountains Vertiskos and Kerdyllio are habitats rich in flora. Their range starts from Mediterranean forest of bushes to the medio-european deciduous forest and fauna from all over Central and Eastern Macedonia [Tsotsos (2000)].

Strymonas and Limni are serving as a geographical border-barrier to the north, but in the same time as a connection. In ancient times, because they are navigable they facilitate movement and communication in the valley of Serres from Amphipolis and Hiona (on the coast) to the interior. The Byzantine Gregoras [Vlahakos (2000)] cites in 14th century Strymon was impassable for walkers and riders and that it was only navigable at Amphipolis from where Gregoras passes going to mission in Serbia.

In the early 20th century the new Greek state plan a broader program associated largely with the problem of malaria, the needs to ensure arable land and the effort of resolving the issue of the Minor Asia refugees installation. Part of this program is the drainage of the lake Achinos.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The study of Visaltia and Nigrita is an effort to investigate, through historical geography, how a flourishing provincial town of 19th century gradually degrades during 20th century.

Historical data relating to the object of the study highlight four historical sections. The first concerns the Classical era, the second one the late Byzantine and Ottoman period, the third focuses on the pre-industrial era of Ottoman rule and the last one is the period after the establishment of the new Greek state.

In the first two periods the identity of the entire region of Visaltia emerges, while the following periods focus on urban scale in the town of Nigrita and its transformation from a small town to a bigger one.

The information for the first section comes from direct and indirect references to classical literature. The period during the late Byzantine and Ottoman period is evidenced through Ottoman archives and monastic documents. For the last two sections, elements derive from direct literature and references about the town, while
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