



Lazaropole: Village of Legends

In the last 100 years Macedonia experienced extreme urbanization resulting in the move of the rural population into towns which have grown without plan leaving the villages deserted. Thus many big villages with long histories became depopulated ghost places leaving the stories of their past grandeur only in the memories of a few new urban dwellers. Lazaropole is one such village nested in the legendary Mijak area between Mavrovo and Debar artificial lakes. Lazaropole is not as famous as its neighbour and rival Galicnik, nor has it been revived to the same extent. But at the same time its legends and some renovated houses representative of the

traditional architectural style of the region make it a perfect destination, especially in the autumn.

Lazaropole is in the bounds of Mavrovo National park, but it lies much higher than the lake. It can be reached both from Mavrovo village and from the Radika River valley near the Monastery of St. John Bigorski. Situated on a flat hilltop plateau, Lazaropole is perfect for long walks in a fantastic oak and beech forest scenery and breathing some of the cleanest air in the country at the elevation of 1350 meters, the altitude at which only a few settlements are built in the country. The mild mountain climate due to the influence of the Mediterranean which extends along



the River Radika, gives the area over 2000 sunny hours per year. Scents of mountain flowers, fascinating views of the summits of the surrounding mountains, the herds of wild horses as well as the opportunity to take horse riding lessons at the nearby farm make a visit to the village a splendid experience.

Behind today's oblivion here hides a settlement with a colourful history and strong economy dating back at least to the Middle Ages. According to the legends, the village was named after a local medieval hero Lazar who was the only survivor of the Ottoman attack on the village. He crawled outside the cave where all other residents were ambushed and killed and built a new home which grew into Lazaropole. There are about 400 houses in the village. The oldest as well as the renovated ones are built in the typical Mijak highland style reminiscent of medieval towers. They had two or three high stone floors, and wooden terraces and rooms on the top level.

The village was home to many, carvers, fresco and icon painters, master builders

and educators. It had registered families since the 1536 Ottoman census which was important for collecting taxes. One of the main economic and social pillars of the village was its status of a *derven* village. It means that the local population provided security and guiding services for those who were passing through the mountain gorges (*derven*) guaranteeing the safety of each traveller in the name of the Ottoman authorities. This service allowed the local population to carry weapons, something that was not allowed to other Christians. While protecting travellers, the villagers also managed to keep criminal gangs away from the village so that it prospered in peace. Another economic pillar of the welfare of the village was stock breeding for which Bistra and surrounding mountains were ideal thanks to its relatively small altitude of around 1600 metres. Since the 16th century, the villages in the area possessed permission from the Sultan to do stock breeding. This created wealthy and powerful sheep farmers and landlords (called *kjaja*). The families had their own



farms (*bacilo* in Macedonian) with around 5 000 sheep each. They kept the herds on the mountains during the summer season, while in winter they travelled down with the sheep as far as Thessaloniki and Kavala. The landlords were even granted permission to employ *sejmens* – the herds' guards against poachers.

The story of the village church of St. George built in 1838 marvellously illustrates the life and the outreach of Lazaropole villagers. The main donor of the church known as *ktitor* was a wealthy landlord and the head man of the village, Gjurgin Kokale. He expanded his business into horse transportation, money lending and trading, and acquired the position of a military commander and *knez* (village lord). He authored the first known autobiographic text in the Macedonian dialect written with Slavic letters and called *Nakazanie* (Story). He was also allowed to carry a weapon and protect the area from the criminal gangs usually coming from the neighbouring regions of today's Albania. He decided to erect a church in the honour of St. George

who was his patron saint (Gjurgin being the local version of George) and got the permission directly from the Sultan whom he visited personally in 1838. Anatoly Zografski, the Hegumen of the famous Zograf Monastery on Mount Athos and the special envoy to the Russian Patriarchy in Athens who was born in Lazaropole also helped the construction of the new church. The Church was built from stone under special arrangements made by the manager Kjaja Gjurgin. He even paid for a 4 meters high stone wall around the church thus making it unique in its layout. The altar was built of lime stone from the village of Rosoki valued for its acoustics. The iconostasis was deep carved in wood by the famous local carvers. The fresco painting was commenced by the zograf Mikhail and finished by the young Dimitrija Perkoski from the village of Tresonce. He later became the prominent Dico Zograf, the painter of so many churches and one of the founding fathers of Macedonian modern visual art.

The new national borders of the Balkan states emerging from the Ottoman Empire disrupted the natural winter and summer routes of the local stock breeders. Thus the stock breeding was seriously scaled down after the demise of the empire causing poverty and depopulation of the whole area. The Mijaks were the first to migrate to the Balkan capitals and later overseas, expanding the businesses which used to be auxiliary to their main occupation as stock breeders: baking, pastry making, construction, wood carving, fresco painting and church building.

One of the rarely popularized facts about Lazaropole is that the most famous Macedonian folk dance "Teskoto" (The Hard One) originates from this area. Apart from the famous teachers and national heroes like Hegumen Ilarion, Vasil Ikonov and Isaija Mazovski, two Macedonian contemporary writers, Ante Popovski and Simon Drakul, were born in Lazaropole.