

Abandoned Carved Stone Houses

In the curves of Kriva Reka (the Twisted River) there lies one of the most peculiar Macedonian villages. It is almost abandoned. Less than hundred older people live in the houses which are spread around in groups forming neighborhoods scattered over more than 15 square kilometers. It is said that one needs two hours to visit the whole village. There are many facts and legends speaking about the glorious past of the village and the whole area.

The village is called Sopsko Rudare and is first mentioned in the Ottoman *deftersin* 1519. It is mentioned in connection with the mining activities of the local population belonging to Slavic tribes. The term is used (probably by the Ottomans) to distinguish it from another village in the region called Tursko rudare (Turkish miners). The village is only 16 kilometres away from Kratovo,

which was a mining centre in Macedonia since Antiquity.

Unlike today, when the village is hardly accessible due to non asphalted roads and hilly terrain, in the past it stood on the imperial road connecting Skopje with Istanbul. Some old paving stones can still be seen on the village streets.

The biggest asset of the village is a large number of old almost deserted houses which were masterfully built from rocks carved and arranged to form beautiful façades. Although nested around the hills and slopes of the Kriva Reka valley they very much resemble condensed Mediterranean towns along the Adriatic coast. The shape and the beauty of these houses can lead to the conclusion that they either belonged to rich people, or to skillful masters who built their own houses in the manner known only to them, since they belonged to guilds





nice Ottoman style arch bridge over the river is still in use. There is an old rotunda church of grand proportions. Its size and the quality of materials suggest that it once may have been a cathedral serving a larger population or had administrative importance. And there is a better known site with the megalith rock Cocev Kamen. The villagers believe that all the unusual

which built mosques, churches, city walls, towers, hammams, caravan serays and other landmark buildings of the Ottoman Empire. The reason to opt for the second conclusion is the still uncontested reputation of people from the area as skilled masons and construction workers.

Another element of the village heritage is the legend about the healing abilities of the five wells in the village. They are devoted to St. Petka, and are carefully covered to preserve their cleanliness. The locals say that thousands of people visit the wells annually to obtain the healing waters. Another legend which is spreading is associated with the character of Dedo (Grandpa) Zafir who was an old man living in the beginning of the twentieth century. The oldest villagers testify to his prophetic gift and remember his proverbial prophecies. They say, although he lived in such a remote area he predicted sensor doors, airplanes, long distance calls, heart transplantation, conglomeration of the cities and many other modern phenomena.

The fantastic terrain and the beautiful stone houses are complemented by other landmarks still undiscovered by tourists. The old fortress of Konjuh guards the access to the area above the Kriva Reka river. Its

rocks on the top of the hills are actually megaliths belonging to a network of religious signs of the archaic population that once had its kingdom in the area.

Today, the almost deserted village is waiting for the return of its inhabitants whomigrated to the towns of Kratovo, Kumanovo and Skopje. Unfortunately only a small number of people have retired in the beauty of their homeland. Some of them are trying to develop their agricultural and stock breeding skills. They have their own gardens with fruits and vegetables or are producing delicious goat cheese sold only through family and friendship networks in the big towns.

It is widely believed that the building of the transport Corridor 8 with a railway and a highway passing near the village will bring more visitors to the local sights. But the residents are not sure if they want this to happen or not. Superior transport connections may bring the noise of the urbanity to these peaceful area. But they are not total recluses as they enjoy the popular gathering on St. Theodor's Saturday, the feast falling on the first Saturday after Easter when people living elsewhere return to the village to celebrate, to gather together and to share stories and news.