

A Return to Mani

In 1985 when I was 20 I made my first solo itinerant journey. I had gone to Paris for a year to study French, and at the end of classes I had resolved to travel. I took the train across France to Italy, stopped in Rome, and then continued south. I took the ferry from Brindisi to Corfu and then on to Pelopponesia in Greece. I remember that the roads were very rudimentary then as I headed south to the Mani Peninsula, at the tip of Pelopponesia. I was a greenhorn, with almost no experience, and no adventures under my belt. I reread my diaries from that time, and what stands out in them is my utter innocence and the strength of my convictions. I possessed that quality which only youths and fanatics can possess: certitude.

Upon arriving in Areopoli, the last significant village as one moves south through Mani, one is immediately struck by a prominent and very steep mountain, rising to around 750 meters above sea level. One is, of course, right next to the sea. On top of this mountain is the Chapel of Prophet Ilias. As a youth in 1985 I saw this mountain and immediately set out to climb to the top. I did not even bother to search for a path, just headed straight up, over extremely steep rocky ground, with thorn bushes which tore my pants. I do not think I even brought water with me. What strikes me about my journey at that time was the degree to which it was an inner journey more than an outer one. I was observing myself and living a spiritual voyage, things which I can do now but not with the same clarity. I hiked fast, stopping to rest, and when I reached the summit ridge I moved along it towards the small building at the top. The view was beautiful, sunny but with a kind of mist that instilled a pleasant imprecision in the landscape.

When I reached the walled enclosure around the small building I looked around before climbing over it. On a small flat terrace area were a bell, a well, and the chapel. Below part of the wall, to the north of where I had come up the mountain, there was a sort of goat cemetery. I had seen mountain goats on the way up, and here, apparently, all of the mountain goats came to die, or their carcasses were brought. In that spot lay dozens of long horns from the mountain goats. I selected two and took them with me. One of them still sits on a bookshelf in my living room. I then entered the chapel. There was a plaque with names and dates, the oldest from 1882, perhaps hermits who had lived and died here. An altar, at which I prayed. Various icons, and a place to light a candle. I did not light a candle, but I engraved a small symbol on the wall next to some other markings from previous

visitors. I then descended the mountain by a steeper and even less sensible way than the way I had come up.

For a reason I do not fully understand, I was moved to return to this place forty years later, in 2025. I was 20 then. I am 60 now. Then I knew nothing about travel nor about adventure, except the dreamed adventures of childhood. Now I am an experienced traveler and minor adventurer. What has not changed since then? From youth to late middle age. From impecunious to wealthy. From dirt tracks and narrow roads to EU-financed highways. There is even a mobile phone transmitter now, a few hundred meters down the ridge from the chapel, with a private road up the other side of the mountain for technicians to access it. But the chapel is still there.

This time, I have a GPS map in my phone, and I found a path up to the chapel. I inquired of a local man who spent his childhood there and remembered hiking the path prior to 1985. So it was there then, but I did not find it nor cross it on my hike to the ridge. This time I also I had clothes for bad weather, water, a snack, a carbon fiber hiking pole, and binoculars. I hiked at a sustainable pace and did not stop at all. The path was at times hard to follow, as it crossed a couple of very steep scree slopes where the rocks underfoot slid down as one ascended. Arriving at the top, there was now a second building. The well was gone but the bell was still there. And the goat cemetery was also gone, perhaps covered by a much larger cement terrace around the chapel. Inside, the chapel was the same as before. The plaque with names and dates, icons, altar, and a place to light candles. This time, after praying, I lit one, and made a donation to the offering box.

I stayed up there for some time, pondering the changes 40 years had wrought. The greatest change is within me. Back then, in 1985, I believed in so much, was so full of certainty: certainty in the existence of Wisdom, of Truth, of some sort of Divine Hand taking part in the world. Now I believe in much less. At 20 *I knew*. At 60 *I know not*. Perhaps wisdom is the journey from certainty to doubt.

I could not find my etching in the wall from 1985 covered by layers of white paint. I ate my snack outside, looking out over the eternal sea, on which Ulysses had sailed of old. Now there remains only to descend, to return to daily life, which, perhaps, I will see with greater clarity thanks to this small pilgrimage. I will go when my candle burns down.