



Tatoi Estate

Tatoi, located 5 km north of Athens's suburbs, and 27 km from the Athenian Acropolis was the summer palace and 10,000 acre estate of the former Greek Royal Family, and the site of George II of the Hellenes's birth. The area is a densely wooded southeast-facing slope of Mount Parnitha, and its ancient and current official name is Decelea.

The Greek Royal Family obtained the estate during the 1870s. After 1916 many of the buildings burnt down. In the 1920s most of the estate became public property, but in 1936 it was returned to the Royal Family. They were forced to relinquish it after the referendum of 1973.[1]

The confiscation of the estate and of other property of the deposed and exiled King, Constantine II, without any compensation, led to a court case in the European Court of Human Rights. The king's argument centered on the claim that the property in question was acquired by his predecessors by legal means and was therefore subject to regular personal inheritance. The Greek state argued that the property was either used by the royal family by virtue of its sovereign status or obtained by taking advantage of that status, and therefore, once the monarchy was abolished, the property should revert to public ownership automatically. The Court struck a midway course in reaching its verdict and ordered the Hellenic Republic to pay the exiled king compensation, of a small fraction of less than 1% of its worth, while allowing the Greek state to retain ownership of the property.

New era begins for former royal estate

While the former royal estate of Tatoi on Mount Parnitha, north of Athens, came under the possession of the Greek state 10 years ago, little was done in the way of safeguarding, promoting and developing the summer palace, its outbuildings and vast grounds until last year.

A few weeks ago, the Ephorate of Contemporary and Modern Monuments of Attica unanimously approved plans for the renovation and reutilization of three Tatoi buildings. At the same time, all household and other items were removed from the palace itself. Following a decision by Alternate Minister of Education, Religion, Culture and Sports Costas Tzavaras, a number of these items are now protected under a cultural heritage law and are being conserved by the General Secretariat of Culture's conservation department.

In addition, a study developed as a part of the Strategic Plan for Athens regarding the possible future usage of the former royal estate has been released for public consultation. Objections to three of the study's key ideas have already been expressed by the Tatoi Friends Association, an organization largely responsible for much of the action surrounding Tatoi's plight in the last few months.

One of the most positive aspects resulting from the Tatoi Friends Association's citizen action was the

unanimous approval of a plan regarding the restoration of a route connecting Tatoi with Lake Kithara. The study was originally put together by the Hellenic Society for the Protection of the Environment and Cultural Heritage, a proposal which paved the way for Tatoi's inclusion in the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF), through a budget set at 6.5 million euros. Historian Costas Stamatopoulos played a pivotal role in promoting the Tatoi issue at times which could be defined as "unfriendly" to the former royal estate, both through his writings on Tatoi as well as in his capacity as vice president of the Hellenic Society for the Protection of the Environment and Cultural Heritage.

A few days ago, winemaker and current Thessaloniki Mayor Yiannis Boutaris and Sotiris Ioannou, a prominent wine producer and president of the Greek Interprofessional Organization for Vine and Wine, met with Attica Regional Governor Yiannis Sgouros in an attempt to secure the latter's support with regard to a long-term agricultural project aimed at reviving the estate's 30-acre vineyard, among others.

Boutaris noted that the area could serve as a vehicle for the production of over 300 grape varieties, while production of 250,000 bottles of wine per year

would suffice for the venture to become financially viable. The project is also aimed at developing dairy, honey and olive oil production through a system of model farms with a strong educational and research scope. Sgouros agreed to examine a request for the funding of the project's feasibility study.

Besides bold private sector initiatives, the current mobilization with regard to the future of the Tatoi estate is also due to what seems to be a change in sentiment at the Ministry of Culture.

"In my opinion, the collaboration between the public and private sectors is the best solution when it comes to the estate's management. This collaboration, however, will have to be defined by clear rules and be based on strict criteria. The former royal estate is defined as a historical area and should be treated as such," said Lina Mendoni, general secretary at the ministry.

According to Mendoni, while the plan devised as part of the Strategic Plan for Athens includes a number of positive aspects, some points need more fine-tuning. "Tatoi should not turn into a large-scale cafeteria," she said. "You need state-of-the-art touches which will follow in the footsteps of the estate's original function and which will eventually revive both the estate's buildings as well as the entire area."