

CHAPTER 5 SOUTH COAST AND GORGES¹

There is a strong contrast between the north and the south coast of Crete. Almost all the low ground by the sea is on the north coast. On the south the mountains fall almost directly into the sea. The only low ground on the south coast is the long stretch east and west of Hierapetra from south of Lithines [east of Hierapetra] to Myrtos [west of Hierapetra], and the opening of the Mesara plain on the beach below Dibaki [Τυμπάκι]. On the north we have the gentle slopes of Kissamos, next of the Retimo district, then all the bay of Candia and the gulfs of Mirabello and Siteia; the steep stretches of coast are only such pieces as that between Candia and Retimo, which break the general gentle character of the country. The higher parts of the mountain spine of Crete lie closer to the south than to the north. A result of this is that the towns lie on the north coast. On the south there is no considerable place except Hierapetra. Khora Sphakion and Palaiokhora are villages only.

[Paths, from E to W] But this mountain wall is not uninterrupted. Everywhere it is crossed by paths leading up from the little harbours: Kaloi Limniones [officially named Kali Limenes] is the best, and only on the south coast of Crete could it ever be called a Fair Haven. Some of these paths follow valleys, like the Myrtos valley [the Myrtos river and the Sarakina gorge towards Males] or the valley to Stravodoxari and Roukaka [now named Stavrochori and Chrysopigi]. Sometimes they go over dips in the hills like all the paths from the Mesara to the sea, to Treis Ekklesies [presumably from Παράνυμφοι along Μουσουλκλή river via Αμπά gorge], to Koudouma [from Σώπατα?], to Leda [Λέντας], to Kaloi Limniones [from Odigitria monastery?]. Sometimes again they go through narrow and incredibly precipitous gorges. These gorges form such a feature of the country that it will be well to enumerate them in order, beginning from the east and proceeding along the coast to the west.

[Gorges, from E to W] The gorges begin south of Palaikastro and the coast consists of a wall of mountains from Cape Plaka [on east coast, next to Palaikastro] all the way round to Makriyalo, a wall interrupted by a series of narrow gorges. The first runs from the hamlet of Kokhlakies down to Karoubes [Karoumes, on east coast south of Cape Plaka]. The next, which is impassable, is from upper to lower Zakro.² This gorge is like a knife-cut slashing through the barren hills. South of Zakro the hills retreat a little and along the coast there lies the narrow strip of flat land called Xerokampos, and this is connected with the high country round Khandra by at least one gorge [presumably Ziros]. I went up by this way to Khandra after exploring Xerokampos to look for *anticas* at RCB's request.³ The mountain wall turns round the SE corner of Crete, coming back again to the shore, and this southern part is broken by a gorge which comes down from near Khandra, passed by the village of Perivolakia, and debouches on the sea by the little monastery of Ai Yanni Kapsa, perched on a shelf close above the sea immediately to the east of the mouth of the gorge.

Along the south coast the wall ends just west of Ai Yanni Kapsa, where the broad Lithines valley comes to the sea, and we have next the strip of flat land lying in front of the Siteia mountains [Ορνό & Θρυπητή?], then the plain of Hierapetra, and then the rough country between Lasithi and the sea. This is broken by the gorge of Arvi (Trevor-Battye, p. 147) which, only a few yards wide, carries down the water from the higher ground east of Viano to the plain of Arvi by the sea, and after this are

the wider openings which lead down first from Viano to Keratokampos, and then from Mesokhori and the Mesara to the huts at Tsoutsouros.

Westward of Tsoutsouros, in the hills to the south of the Mesara, the gorges are not so marked and the little places that shelter by the sea under the wall of mountains are reached rather by passes than through gorges. Thus from Tsoutsouros westward it is by mountain paths through dips in the hills that there is some communication, first with the hermitage of Maridaki in its little valley, then with Treis Ekklesies, the monastery of Koudouma, then with Leda and Kaloi Limniones, and lastly, after round Cape Lithines [Λίθινο], with the cove of Matala. Beyond this there is a gap in the hills formed by the opening of the Mesara plain, and the long beach below Dibaki, and presently by the opening of the Amari valley and the new settlement of Agia Galini. Then the mountains come down to the sea again and a wall begins which continually rises until the formidable barrier of the Sphakia mountains, dying away again towards Cavo Krios, the SW point of the island.

The gorges which cut these mountains are from east to west as follows. Two lead down from the upper land round Koxare to the valley behind Preveli. The eastern one is, I believe, impassable; the western one contains the road from Retimo and the north to Preveli. It is called *to kroutaliotiko to pharangi* [Κουρταλιώτικο: PM]. The valley behind Preveli, shut off from the sea by the Preveli mountain, is drained to the east by a miniature gorge; on the west it opens on the sea with the flat land below Myrthios [i.e. the area of the modern settlement of Plakias]. This village is approached by its own gorge [Κοτσιφού]. West of the Myrthios plain a path runs along the irregular slopes over the sea, crossing the mouth of the slash in the hills which carries down water to Rodakino.⁴

Shortly to the west [of Myrthios] there is a flat strip by the sea which reaches almost to Khora Sphakion. On this strip close to the sea lies the Venetian fortress of Frangokastello, and on the inner edge of it a row of villages which serve as the winter habitations for the mountaineers, each being connected by a gorge with a high village whither the people go in the summer to pasture their flocks. Thus the first of this string of villages is Kapsodasos and by it Patsianos. From them a gorge ascends to the mountain plain of Kallikrati. Then Vouvas is the winter village of Asphendou⁵ and Komitades of Askiphou.⁶ Passing one more gorge which leads, I believe, to no village⁷ – I went up it once for two hours and found nothing – we reach Hora Sphakion.⁸ From here all the way to Palaiokhora the mountain wall is as close to the sea as it is in the stretch south of the Mesara, but here it is much higher and more threatening. The path west from Hora has therefore to ascend to the plain of Anopolis and descend to Loutro.⁹ It takes only a third of the time to go by boat. After Anopolis the road keeps high, but dives down into the wonderful ravine, on the western ridge of which the little village of Aradena clings. Then it winds to the sea and [after following the coast for a long distance] reaches the mouth of the Roumeli gorge, the last and the most formidable and wonderful of the series [Samaria gorge]. A narrow valley to Souya [Agia Eirini gorge] and a wider one to Palaiokhora [the one from Αζογυρές?] complete the connexions of the interior with the south coast. The west coast, though the mountains come near to the sea, does not present the same uncompromising wall of hills as guards the south and a part of the east where, indeed, the only openings giving easy access to the heart of the island are at the isthmus of Hierapetra and at the mouth of the Mesara plain by Dibaki.

From the sea this formation gives a most inhospitable look to the island. Except Hierapetra and Khora Sphakion there are no towns or villages of any size to be seen. Many of the villages are entirely hidden; others look down on the sea only from

some considerable height. And to the absence of harbours, except such small coves as at Matala¹⁰ and such open roadsteads as at Hierapetra and Dibaki, must be added the violent local winds caused by the closeness of the high mountains. When the weather elsewhere is fairly calm, the sea close to the coast is lashed by squalls that seem to swoop down directly from the hills and tear the surface into spray.

Each of these gorges has its own character: some are very narrow, some very deep, some well wooded, some bare. I describe them in their proper place.

Peter Mackridge's notes

¹ Many of the places mentioned in this chapter recur in greater detail in other chapters, particularly IX, XII, XXII, XVI.

² This gorge is no longer considered impassable, though it is advertised as the “Gorge of Death”!

³ The word *anticas* was used by Greek country folk to refer to small ancient objects which they had discovered, and which many of them traded with foreign visitors. R. C. Bosanquet was director of the British School at Athens from 1899 until Dawkins succeeded him in 1906. Presumably Bosanquet asked Dawkins to tour villages buying ancient objects from the inhabitants. This was a practice already adopted by Arthur Evans.

⁴ Perhaps from the Κρυονερίτης mountains.

⁵ Vouvas is actually west of the Ασφεντιανό φαράγγι. Vouvas and Nomikiana have their own gorge: το φαράγγι της Κάπνη/του Κάπνη. For connections between highland and lowland villages see ch. 6.

⁶ These two villages are connected via the Imbros gorge.

⁷ The Σφακιανό φαράγγι, with a path marked on modern maps that leads to the Niato area in the middle of nowhere.

⁸ According to Tsougarakis (1988: 337), nothing is known about Chora Sphakion until the Venetian period.

⁹ Nowadays, however, there is also an E4 path running parallel to the coast.

¹⁰ In Minoan times Matala was the port of Phaistos. In Roman times Matala and Leben (modern Lendas) were the two harbours of Gortyn.